

Like a Mighty Army

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*"Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God,
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod."*

IT WAS ONCE told that a certain father refused to allow an unsaved member of his family to sing a song which expressed the personal joys of salvation. Since it could not be sung truthfully he felt it should not be sung at all.

If the Church of God of 1963, were to adopt this conservative policy, singing only those songs which truthfully represented her experience, it may be doubtful that her members would be qualified to sing the beloved hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers."

A portion of Scriptures cautions about a fallacious kind of self-appraisal. To present this ancient warning in modern vernacular, the "New English Bible" (2 Corinthians 10:12) is quoted: "We should not dare to class ourselves or compare ourselves with any of those who put forward their own claims. What fools they are to measure themselves by themselves, to find in themselves their own standard of comparison!"

Man's pilgrimmage to Beulah Land is not traveled on an easy road. Modern church institutions may have their pride in accomplishment, but many will find their distorted sense of values has them strutting in paths other than those trod by the saints of old.

Impending disaster awaits those who have lost their faith in the Word of God, teaching that it is fallible and partly mythical. Others will find their dignified liturgy of little value upon discovering that God and sin cannot be reconciled by bringing worldliness into the activities of the Church.

Still others must face the awful truth that complete sincerity and repeated emotional assurances by an alleged supernatural power fail to cover their persistent transgression of God's moral law.

How Do We Stand?

A list of weaknesses and failures amongst demonstrations of Christianity would be a long and exasperating one. How does the Church of God fit into this picture? Does she belong on this list, or does she tread where the saints have trod?

How many Church of God members have "reconciled" themselves to the so-called "fact" that the message of the Church is an unpopular one? How often have we chanted the misused phrase, "Fear not, little flock . . ." rocking ourselves into drowsiness?

How does the sin of complacency rate in comparison to sins of the gullible who are victimized by deception? How much more lively are the invalid than the dead?

"Like a mighty army moves the Church of God." Is this descriptive of us? If we are not to compare ourselves with ourselves, where shall we look for a valid appraisal? Let's try the Book of Acts!

The theme verse of the Acts of the Apostles (1:8) reveals clearly what it was that made the early Church of God become a mighty army: "But we shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnessess unto me

both in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The second chapter of this book reports that the power came, and the Church of God was on the march!

Similarities Between the Church and Her Lord

It has been observed by R. R. Williams in his book, "The Acts of the Apostles" that there is a direct parallel between Luke's narrative of the life of Jesus, and his account of the progress of the early Church. Both of Luke's books begin with beginnings; Jesus' birth in the manger of Bethlehem, and the beginning of a new dispensation for the Church at the meeting in the upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching follows in the gospel narrative, as do the miracles through the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles. The passion of the Master is paralleled by the sufferings of church leaders. Finally, the resurrection story closes the gospel of Luke, and Acts ends with Paul's being given freedom to preach in Rome.

An imposing sameness stands out in the experiences of the early Church and her Lord. Where are the similarities between the Lord and His Church of today in this land of ours?

Jesus' birth was humble materially, but it was planned by God and was full of the highest meaning. Today our children are born with relative ease, thanks to abundant, skilled medical attention, but they come into this world lacking in divine purpose.

Jesus had nowhere to lay His head, but He was always about His Father's business. Today we have soft places to relax, but we find so little to do for God.

Jesus died in innocence forgiving His executioners. We are more prone than ever to experience serious personality conflict because we lack understanding and willingness to compromise with our own brethren, even in the most insignificant differences. Jesus prayed all night, on occasion shed-

ding drops of blood. Today one is considered emotional and undignified to shed tears in public services.

"The Acts of the Holy Spirit"

It has been wisely suggested that the Acts of the Apostles might more accurately have been named the "Acts of the Holy Spirit." This is a history of the supernatural Spirit of God working through men who had abandoned themselves to His cause.

It is difficult to abandon oneself, but the Holy Spirit either controls or He leaves.

Peter was bold enough to preach about Jesus at the very doorstep of his persecutors' headquarters. After being flogged and warned against any further such impudence, he declared, "... Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19, 20).

Perhaps we cannot deny ourselves for the cause of Christ because we are too obedient to man. Man dictates our standard of living. He dictates the type of entertainment we attend by making it so convenient for us. He dictates our aspirations by placing economic and social pressures upon

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us. The typical young American falls into debt quickly to purchase social status. Then he attempts to retain his "honor" by sacrificing his commitment to God in order to meet his financial obligations.

The eighth chapter of Acts tells how the Spirit spoke to Philip, the wandering evangelist, suggesting that he join himself to a chariot coming into view. "And Philip ran thither to him," records Luke as he reflects Philip's enthusiasm.

A portion of the prophet Isaiah was being read by an Ethiopian, sitting in the chariot. Verse 35 says, "Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." What happens when our mouths open? How often our mouths open before any part of the gospel of salvation and truth comes out! It is true that we can not *always* be witnessing and talking religion, but it is also true

An Identification Mark

A story that concerns an Internal Revenue investigator has been used in several church papers. Tax returns showing an income under \$5,000 claimed church giving of \$624. It looked suspicious. Here was a case which should be investigated. But the man produced valid receipts, and then coolly invited the investigator to attend church with him.

"Thanks," was the reply, "but I belong to a church myself."

"Excuse me," was the rejoinder, "that possibility hadn't occurred to me."

"As I rode home," said the investigator, who told the story on himself, "I kept wondering what he meant by that last remark. It wasn't until the next time I put my usual dollar in the offering plate that it came to me."—SELECTED

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that too many of us practically *never* do. It is impressive to note that Philip knew Scripture well enough to begin at the very passage being read by the Ethiopian to tell about Jesus.

Yielded to the Right Master

The drama of the mighty and marching Church of God continues in chapter nine. The very mention of the Hebrew persecutor, Saul, undoubtedly brought pain, sorrow, and fear into the hearts of those who elected to stand up and be counted in the camp of Christ. Saul was determined to smother this new threat to Judaism, called Christianity, singlehandedly.

One day this hardened, determined executioner was struck down by a light from heaven while enroute to Damascus. A voice from above informed him that he was wasting his efforts in persecuting the Church of God. What a testimony this is of Jesus' love and care for the Church! Saul immediately sensed that the voice was authoritative, and he changed masters, asking, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

How refreshing it would be to have large percentages of our church membership approach God with this question, "What wilt thou have me to do?" If the hearts of all those making up our congregations would concentrate on finding ways to be more useful in God's service, the Church's pace would certainly speed up.

It would be wrong to assume that there was no disagreement in the early Church; that the leaders and laity always got along well. Incongruity is reported in the fifteenth chapter. And the difference of opinion was concerned with issues that were basic and vital. Vastly differing viewpoints were openly expressed. However, the Holy Spirit caused a wise agreement to be reached, and the forward march continued.

The great momentum of the Church had much to do with the reconciling of opposing forces. The principals, being dedicated to Christ, gave consideration only to the issues at hand. There is no record of personal feelings involved. Self-abandonment is again obvious here. The vital lesson to be learned is that issues quickly turn into personality clashes when proper momentum is lacking, and the flesh is too much with us.

Turning Adversity into Advantage

A final comparison concerns the turning of apparent adversity into marked gains made for the cause of spreading the gospel. The terms *luck* and *fortune* belonged to other societies, while the Church of God thought only of God's purposeful dealing with her.

Consider the death of Stephen. How could a struggling, new religion afford to lose such a valuable and promising leader? This tragedy had considerable impression upon one consenting bystander who later assumed a responsibility no less important than that of keynoting the gospel to the Gentile world.

A prayer circle was meeting in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. One can imagine an atmosphere of discouragement and apprehension after having suffered the loss of two leaders: James by death, and Peter by imprisonment. But, God's power to deliver Peter surprised everyone, and the young Church was again spirited in her forward march.

Consider how Paul and Silas were stripped of their clothing, beaten, thrown into a rocky, cavernous "jail" with their feet locked in stocks. They prayed and sang praises to God! Suddenly an earthquake came and shook these men of God free. There are numbers of us chained to our frustrating and unprofitable efforts at self-

enhancement who could escape to freedom by praising God and praying more often and more sincerely.

Consider Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem after the repeated warnings that he would be captured there. This apostle had long before abandoned concern for himself. He plodded undaunted into Jerusalem. His being taken prisoner did not close Paul's mouth. This time he did not preach to small groups huddled in caves, out on riverbanks, or in upperrooms at night. Now, he broadcast the message of redemption to the governors and rulers of the land.

It is amusing to read how Paul, while a captive of Felix, was periodically informed that a bribe could purchase his freedom. Each time Paul was given audience, instead of discussing financial gratuities, he "...reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come..." (Acts 24:25).

Some consider it a political mistake for Paul to have appealed to Cæsar, because Festus, successor to Felix, reasoned that he would have been given freedom by a lower court. Even this probable reverse brought advancement, giving occasion to tell of Jesus to the Roman emperor, himself. It is in this manner that Christianity first gained world-wide recognition by the highest human authority known.

Comparison in Rate of Progress

It is estimated that the Book of Acts covers a period of 33 years. What a change took place from the time that 120 men met in the upper room at Pentecost, and the establishment of many churches, including one in the capital city of Rome. Our *Bible Advocate* is in its one-hundredth year of publication, a period three times as long as that covered by the report in the Book of Acts. Are we treading where the saints have trod?

The writer of this appraisal zealously categorizes himself as one who loves the Church of God and believes firmly in her message. It is for this reason that this effort is offered to stir a spirit of restlessness. We *must* realize that it is foolish to compare ourselves with ourselves!

It is recognized that inspiration seldom comes about by prodding others. Peter, Philip, and Paul were not primarily men of accomplishment because they could move crowds with the power of vocabulary. They had forsaken self and were on fire within!

What Can Be Done?

Good taste would be lacking to offer a negative report without some suggestions which would help to channel our determination. The following suggestions are offered with humility, and with the

to the smallest and newest Sabbath schools could give serious consideration to more complete self-abandonment. This is not to imply that the present leaders are not dedicated. They deserve appreciation. However, after singing, "Let go, and let God have His way with thee," it would help if there were more examples to show that it can be done.

THIRD, we tend to think too often in terms of big things for our church without considering the costs which must first be met. A small congregation would like to hire a leading preacher of the denomination to come and build up their local church. No recognition is given to the fact that preachers do not build congregations; zealous members do. A pastor is "good" because his congregation is alive, and he is mediocre when his congregation is in need of dedication. The price for growth

FOURTH, we need to devise ways to spread our message and influence into more cities and towns in America. Evidently, our rate of growth in our own country is too slow. We must remember that expansion cannot come without a speedy and abundant strengthening of our present situation. No laborer in secular employment can retain a position who is not worthy of his hire. How can we allow ourselves to think that God is pleased with our service if it shows no profit from decade to decade?

FIFTH, we need more hundreds of brethren who will dare to be spiritually strong. People who find it necessary to decide whether or not to attend their own church on Sabbath are in need of spiritual revival. It should be automatically assumed that when church is in progress, the member belongs there. Brethren are needed who are sufficiently burdened about the message of God's truth that they will attend every Bible study possible to better equip themselves.

The business of the church is not to furnish hammocks for the lazy, but yokes for the drawing of loads.—Selected.

What We Need

We need those who are bold enough to risk embarrassment in telling the story of the cross of Christ, and in praying before an indifferent public. Others are needed who have courage to venture into positions of leadership, even though awkwardness and blushing threatens.

There is a difference between radicalism and boldness. There is also a difference between discretion and spiritual weakness! Soldiers are needed who will proudly wear the uniform of their heavenly Kingdom. How many of us dare to be spiritually strong?

Perhaps we cannot truthfully sing about the Church of God of 1962, marching like a mighty army where the saints have trod. If not, shall we join hearts and sing fervently, "Lord, send us a revival, and let it begin in me!" Then see the Church of God of 1963 make real strides forward.

conviction that they have precedent in the experiences of the early Church.

FIRST, the members of the Church of God in our country must be determined to discount the value of plush comforts and the straining for same, and direct this spirit of restlessness toward the gospel work. In these times of discontentment, there has never been more satisfaction with an ever weakening individual church effort. This fault cannot be assigned to one church alone. It is everywhere obvious. But, we do too little to stem this tide. We are in urgent need of an atmosphere of spiritual restlessness with our own condition and service. Our hearts need to be pricked so that we cannot rest until we find peace in service for Christ.

SECOND, it would appear that the leadership of the Church down

in any church whether local or nation-wide must be paid in active missionary work by every member, or progress lags. Some ought to look down from their perch on the wagon and note how few consecrated souls are pushing and moving the load!

Another cost is that of giving away our children—to God. Too many visualize a glorious success for their sons and daughters while placing them on the altar of worldly attainment. Where are the mothers and fathers who have the spiritual strength to pray about their children as though they were God's? How many parents will interpret the restlessness in their sons as God's call, and advise them to answer, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth"? We cannot demonstrate any love for God and His Church when we fail to trust Him with our most valuable possessions.