

PERPLEXING CHURCH PROBLEMS

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My message this morning is based upon three questions out of which will come a considerable number of other questions which I trust will at least be thought provoking, even if lacking in the inspirational element. The questions are as follows: Are there such things as perplexing church problems? Ought there to be such things? Is there any way of overcoming such things?

The first one of these questions will occupy the most of my time. The second one will be readily answered. And in the third one will be found the real key and heart of the message.

To begin with, then: Are there such things as perplexing church problems? Like the poor, they are with us always. Rather than attempt to enumerate the perplexing problems, I have reduced them to three groups, as follows: The problems of Right Living, or Consistency; the problems of Living Together, or Democracy; and the problems of Enlistment, or Efficiency.

Who should be members of a Baptist church? This is beginning with an easy question. You have been brought up on the answer. You can give it readily, without hesitation. Only those persons who have been regenerated. And who are these? Are they such as have once made a profession of faith, been immersed and then have united with the church, or are they such persons who in addition to having done these necessary things, are now living the regenerate life? And what is the regenerate life? It is nothing less than the life which is giving testimony to the power of Christ to save from sin; the life that gives evidence of at least persistent effort to overcome sin; the life that gives evidence of diligent use of the means of grace; the life that is neither selfish nor worldly.

The problems of Right Living have closely associated with them the problems of discipline. Should there be such a thing as church discipline? Which is better, to have a great church roll with hundreds of names of church members, good, bad and indifferent, here there and everywhere; or to have a very much smaller roll made up of such as at least try to live righteously? Is it better to keep certain names on the church roll because their removal might put out of harmony with the church certain ones who are very much more worth while; or is it better to purge the roll regardless of immediate consequences, bearing in mind all the time that which is right, and also the consequences which will be abiding when the noise and the smoke of the conflicts have disappeared? How far should the church permit her members to wander into sin or to neglect their obligations before bringing them to discipline? Is not the church guilty of injustice to her own when she permits members to go on their ways of sin or neglect without attempting to restrain them? When it is remembered that it is usually the weaker ones who fall by the wayside, and the stronger ones who stay in the running with the church, might not the weak and the erring and the neglected ones accuse the church and with justice, too, of being guilty of the greater sin in leaving them to themselves? What has become of the sacred covenant

obligation to watch over one another in brotherly love? After all, is not discipline at the proper time, in the early stages of sin or neglect, a real kindness?

I recall the story heard in Seminary days in the class in pastoral theology of a faithful son who preferred charges against his own father, a judge, a member of a Baptist church, who had been guilty of drunkenness; which father at the next covenant meeting of the church publicly acknowledged his sin, thanked his son for his action, renounced his sin and humbly asked for reinstatement in the church.

Just what is discipline? Is it always, necessarily, reprimand and trial and withdrawal of fellowship? Is there not also, and better, a discipline of mercy which by kindly visitation and reminder, and entreaty with remonstrance, might save from sorrow and misery and despair, and loss of usefulness? What are the functions of deacons? What became of the plan of organization into larger and smaller groups left with you some months ago? Are we satisfied to go on in ruts, with the burdens of work and responsibility borne by the same faithful few, or shall we arouse ourselves to the undeveloped possibilities of the many individuals who go to make up our church organization?

Next come the problems of Living Together, or Democracy in the Church. Why are we Baptists and not Methodists, or Presbyterians, or Episcopalians, or Roman Catholics? You can find church organizations under these names in our own community and nearly everywhere. We are Baptists because we have certain, definite, clearcut convictions and ideals for the maintenance and propagation of which we form a church group of our own. We have such church groups in our city, and they are to be found all over Virginia, and all over the Southland, and the nation and the world. Having such a church group, we determine our own plans and policies without outside interference. In the determining of plans and policies every member can have a voice and a vote. Decisions are reached by majority vote. Disagreement over plans and policies should end with the reaching of a decision. When we have the spirit of Christ, and are cultivating acquaintance with him, then it will be possible to live together in unity and peace; then we shall have participation in one another's lives; then we shall be brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. The finest tribute ever paid to the Christians of the early days was the exclamation, "How they love one another!" Nothing better could be said of us.

Next comes the problems of Enlistment, or Efficiency in the Church. For what purpose does our church exist? Is it to serve as a club for a few of our church members, or is it to serve humanity here and throughout the world? Is our organization efficient? What is the percentage of efficiency? If we should employ an efficiency expert and place in his hands the records of our various church organizations and activities, and let him be a quiet witness of our doings for a stated period, and report on his findings just as accurately and faithfully as he would report on some secular business enterprise, what percentage of efficiency would he give to us? Would we be ashamed of his report, or are we already callous enough not to care? Would it not be a helpful thing, if sometimes in our annual reports to ourselves, and to our District Associations, we would make mention of the many things which we did not do, instead of the few things which we did do?

How many lists might be made from our one church roll? There are those who attend the services of public worship on Sundays, and those who do not. Those who attend with a fair degree of regularity, and those who attend spasmodically. There are those who manifest some concern for the religious educational program of the church and

those who do not. There are those who care something about the midweek prayer service of the church and those who do not. There are those who put Christian obligations in first place and those who can readily walk by the open doors of their church to attend some entertainment. There are those who give towards the support of the church and those who do not. Those who give in any proportion to their blessings and abilities, and those who give as little as they think they can get by with. There are those who are missionary, those who are omissionary and those who are antimissionary. Resident church members and non-resident church members, such are satisfied with long distance church membership and absent treatment. Our roll has seventy-five names of persons scattered from Washington on the Pacific coast all the way to Georgia. And I judge there are almost as many who are now residents of our community who hold church membership in other Baptist churches, or perhaps in letters down in their trunks. What a vast difference exists between our church roll and the names which show up on our church treasurer's book. How many names show such irregular giving! How many gave for a few Sundays and then stopped giving! What surprises would greet the eye if the pages of the book should be opened to view. The church treasurer knows much about us. He knows just who are worth everything in the world, and just who are worth less; and he is conservative, too. He wonders to what use a good many put their church envelopes. He never sees them.

Ought there to be such things as perplexing church problems? We can find no consolation in the fact that every church has them; for no church ought to be content with them. Nor is there any consolation in the fact that from New Testament times the churches have been perplexed with problems; for there could be the aim and the effort to work at the solution of problems and to reduce them to the minimum. And the average problem, left to itself, does not take care of itself, nor eradicate itself. And if our problems are the same as they were several years ago, because we have made no effort to overcome them, then are we not guilty of the sin of neglect? It may be easier and more comfortable to follow the lines of least resistance, but such courses of conduct do not tend to the building up of Christian character either in ourselves or in others.

Is there any way of overcoming perplexing church problems? I have purposely withheld the announcement of my text until now. It is a part of the fifth verse of the eighth chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in which he says of the Macedonian Christians, "But first they gave their own selves to the Lord." Giving one's self to the Lord means nothing less than the laying of one's self daily upon the altar of sacrifice and service. And this is no light thing. On the contrary it is the hardest thing in the world to do. It cost blood. It costs a good bit more than most people are willing to pay. And yet there is no solution of our perplexing problems without the doing of this great, costly thing. When we are doing this then other things will be easy. Such giving of one's own self to the Lord will result in a gracious revival of religion in the individuals heart, which will spread to other and yet other hearts until we shall have made of our church a great character building, evangelizing, missionary institution. My association with you leads me to make the statement that some of you, yes, more and more of you, are doing this thing or are coming to the doing of it.

In the beautiful village of Chamonix ... in the high Alps Mountains, from which point travelers desiring to reach the lofty summit of Mt. Blanc, eleven miles in the distance, begin their ascent, there stands a monument in granite and bronze. Perhaps every tourist on arriving at Chamonix desires to have pointed out first of all from the high

mountain peaks on every side, the snow capped summit of Mt. Blanc. On the block of granite stand two figures in bronze. One is the figure of deSaussure, the famous French student and geologist, looking eagerly, intently and with expectation, towards where the other figure, that of the celebrated mountaineer guide, Balmat, the man who first overcame all the obstacles of ice and snow and unsuspected dangers, and found the way to the lofty summit and reached the snow capped peak of the loftiest mountain in Europe, points the way. Through the days and through the years the figure points with accuracy towards that which so many anxiously long to see and to reach, the summit of the great white mountain. Thus will the life hid with Christ in God through the giving of one's own self to the Lord point with accuracy to that which is highest and noblest and best. The challenge is a superb and glorious one that calls for the best that is in souls willing to attempt the heroic. Will you meet the challenge?
