

Church Perpetuity and Succession

By Elder David Pyles

Isaiah said concerning Israel, ***“Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah,”*** (Isa 1:9). There is a simple principle in this scripture that is well-established elsewhere in the Bible: It is that God never leaves Himself without a witness in the world. Isaiah said that if his nation had become void of a witness, then it would have been removed from the earth like Sodom and Gomorrah. It was preserved on account of a ***very small remnant of witnesses***. The same is true of the earth in general. It was created for God’s glory. When it no longer serves to this effect then it will no longer have a reason to exist. However, it is preserved on account of the true believers in it, who Jesus called the ***“salt of the earth.”*** This witness has at times been very small, but never nil.

One of the most touching illustrations of this can be seen in the darkest hour of world history. When Jesus was abducted in Gethsemane to be condemned to death, His disciples fled in fear and despair. However, providence arranged that John would follow Him all the way to the cross. Jesus had formerly taught, ***“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it,”*** (Mt 16:25). John put his life at risk in that critical hour, and legend says that John lived to be a very old man, and that he was the only disciple to escape a martyr’s death. There is likely no coincidence in these facts. However, upon seeing Jesus suffer and die, John himself fell into the same despair as the others. At that point, the Lord moved upon the heart of the crucified thief to cry, ***“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,”*** (Lk 23:42). When all others had lost hope that Jesus was a king, the thief was enabled to see otherwise. Then, as life slipped from the body of the thief, and it appeared that, notwithstanding all, the world would be left without a believer, the Lord moved upon the centurion and his fellow soldiers to say, ***“Truly this was the Son of God,”*** (Mt 27:54). As one witness falls the hand of God raises another. The witness is a fire that cannot be extinguished.

Jesus said, ***“...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,”*** (Mt 16:18). By the “rock” He meant Himself. Some have errantly claimed the term referred to Peter, but the writings of Peter himself will show otherwise (1Pet 2:1-8). The promise was that all the combined powers of Hell would never be able to extinguish the church. Again, in a famous text, the Lord said,

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. – Mt 28:19-20

This is of course the so-called “Great Commission” because it commissions the church to teach and baptize throughout the world, and then declares plainly that Christ will always accompany and strengthen those laboring in this commission so long as the world remains. A similar statement was made of the communion service: **“For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come,”** (1Cor 11:26). Hence, there will be a people in the world administering His baptism and communion until the very day Jesus Christ returns. For these reasons Paul said, **“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen,”** (Eph 3:20-21). If the world has not ended, then God is somewhere being praised in it.

It is an unfortunate fact that, notwithstanding these clear declarations to the contrary, numerous men have emerged over history claiming that gospel truth had been lost from the earth, and that the Lord had distinguished them with the honor of restoring it. In some cases, they claimed that the planet had gone void of truth for several consecutive centuries. In every case, they followed such assertions with palpably unsound doctrine and practice, and no wonder given that their religious movement was itself rooted in a lie. One reason for their success at duping so many is that most Christians have been predisposed to such ideas by their belief in the myth that the world persisted several centuries prior to the Reformation with no churches apart from those of the Catholic denomination. Such claims are not only refuted by the historical record, they are also completely incompatible with the inspired word.

This then leads to a second issue that has been the subject of vigorous debate, namely, whether the perpetual church promised by scripture has existed, and will exist, in an unbroken succession. Most agree that the historical evidence of such is respectable, but the debate is whether the evidence is sufficient to constitute proof. While such historical studies are worthwhile and inspiring, they are accompanied by inevitable limitations and complications. Obviously, one limitation is that the historical record is incomplete and sometimes inaccurate. The other is that the analyst must make subjective judgments as to what qualified as a church in the sight of God. Some historians will be too generous in these judgments and others too severe. A merciful, forbearing God might bless an errant group as a church where a historian would not be so forgiving. One must also consider the principle given by Jesus: **“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required...”** (Lk 12:48). Hence, God might be forbearing of errors in a poor, persecuted and Bible-deprived people that He would not forbear in others under more favorable circumstances.

But the relevant practical question is whether the scriptures do in some sense call for churches to conform to a succession. The answer to this question is unambiguous: They surely do. This being the case, such conformity is duty regardless of what the historical record suggests as to

what God has actually done in respect to succession. A distinction must be made between what God has himself chosen to do and what God has commanded to be done. For example, God may or may not prosper the evangelistic efforts of a church, but this has no bearing on the fact that every church is commanded to evangelize. God may or may not heal a man who is sick, but this has no bearing on our obligation to pray for him. Accordingly, even if God had not preserved churches in an unbroken succession since Christ, churches are still under direction to carry on in a succession. This direction is implied in several ways: First, the ordinance of baptism clearly implies conformity to succession. The new believer is baptized into the church by one who is already converted and baptized. Second, it can be seen in the ordination of elders. The new elder is authorized by means of the laying on of hands of existing elders. The same practice is used with deacons. The scriptures offer no precedent for a spontaneously-generated or self-appointed church member, elder, deacon or church. Third, Acts 19 records the single instance where a group of believers emerged in isolation from authorized churches. In that single case, all of those believers were baptized again. Finally, it can be seen in the calling of Paul. Though he was to be distinguished as an Apostle, and as one of the most influential Christians in history, and though he was to be taught primarily through revelation of Jesus Christ and not of man, Paul was commanded by Jesus Christ Himself to seek out an ordinary elder of an ordinary New Testament church to receive an ordinary baptism. If Jesus Christ made no exception for Paul, then it is presumptuous to suppose He would do it for anyone else.

Therefore, any sincere believer desiring baptism should seek out a sound elder that has been authorized by a sound church. Accordingly, any man having a burden to preach the gospel should not take this authority to himself but receive it in compliance with the scriptural pattern of succession. The same is true of any group of believers wishing to be organized as a church. Experience shows that such groups will likely be blessed with success. But they should not assume the posture of reinventing the church to themselves upon the supposition of no viable alternative. This is in contradiction to the principle that God never leaves Himself without a witness in this world, and it especially contradicts the promise of Christ that the gates of Hell would never prevail against His church. Such a group of believers should seek out a sound church or elder and be organized under their authority.

Yet, it is not our intent to endorse extreme positions that have been taken on this subject. Some have gone so far as to say that if a succession of sound and faithful churches were found, but their succession had a dubious origin 1000 years ago, then all such churches should be considered as bogus along with their baptisms, ordinations, etc. The position is that, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, such a group could not be considered as churches if their pedigree were wrong. In contrast to this, the Bible says that when Christ returns, He will judge every man according to His works (Mt 16:27). It does not say a word about Him judging any man according to his pedigree. Further, He said:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. – Mt 7:16-20

We are confident in saying on the strength of the above principle that if a body of believers is not being blessed by God as a church, then it will not persevere in soundness. Perseverance in soundness is therefore powerful evidence that God has blessed them as a church, in which case, other believers should recognize them the same. There can be no doubt that God forbears and forgives errors of both past and present. *“If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared,”* (Ps 130:3-4). This includes errors in origination as well as errors in continuation.

Still, the greatest commendation the Lord has ever given anyone may have been to the woman who anointed His feet. He simply said, *“She hath done what she could...”* (Mk 14:8). Every reasonable effort should be made to follow scriptures in its pattern of succession. One would be hard-pressed to show that the hypothetical case considered in the prior paragraph actually exists anywhere in the world, but even if it did, a Divine accommodation to a special case does not authorize change to what He has commanded to be the general case. The fact that David was permitted in an exigent circumstance to eat the showbread in the Tabernacle did not mean that men were freed to convert the Tabernacle into a grocery store. It only meant there is a reasonable and merciful God in Heaven.

Adherence to this scriptural pattern is especially obligatory in the modern world where travel and communication have been facilitated to a degree never seen before. Notwithstanding all the evil that has come of it, Internet now allows believers all over the world to communicate with each other. There may be fulfillment of a prophecy in this. Malachi, in speaking of the last days, said: *“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another...”* We can rejoice in that he went on to say, *“...and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him,* (Mal 3:16-17). Compliance with the scriptural pattern of succession is therefore both our duty and our joy. God is the loving parent over His redeemed family. Any parent wishes for their children to seek each other out, communicate with each other and to fellowship in love.