

Sabbath School Lesson #12 – The Church Militant – 12-18 March 2016

Christ must live in our hearts for the church to be kept pure. He pleads, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). This plea is directed to ‘the church at Laodicea,’ to our Seventh-day Adventist Church, which also is ‘the church militant.’ While the Seventh-day Adventist is the true Church for which Christ is truly the head, it is in need of being sanctified by the truth! We are told, “The truth is a sanctifying power; but the church militant is not the church triumphant. There are tares among the wheat. “Wilt thou then that we ... gather them up” was the question of the servant; but the master answered, “Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.” The gospel net draws not only good fish, but bad ones as well, and the Lord only knows who are His’ {TM 61.2}. We turn to the apostles to learn how to keep the church pure.

Miracles were common occurrences in the church in the days of the apostles. This, to most people in these days, would seem to be a contradiction of terms, since a miracle is usually supposed to be something out of the ordinary course; but it is the exact truth; for the ascended Lord was recognised as constantly present among them; and miracles are the Lord’s ordinary work. So when the apostles had been tried for performing a miracle, and had, on their discharge, told the brethren of their experience, they laid the case before the Lord, and prayed: “Now, Lord, behold their threatenings, and grant unto Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy Word, by stretching forth Thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of Thy Holy Child Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30).

“And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the Word with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: ...” (Acts 4:31-32).

It was by the Holy Spirit of God in them that miracles were wrought; for we are told that the Word which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, “was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will” (Hebrews 2:3-4).

It was the Holy Spirit that united “the multitude of them that believed” into “one heart and soul;” for we read that “the unity of the Spirit” is to be kept in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). It is only by possessing one Spirit that a multitude of people can be of one heart and soul; and the Holy Spirit of God is the only universal, all-pervading Spirit (Psalms 139:7-12).

It is this same Spirit that purifies the heart. When the apostles were all assembled at a later date, together with the elders of the church, Peter, describing the conversion of the Gentiles, said, “God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did unto us; and put not difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8-9). All who believe receive the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39), – the “living water” which, a pure river, clear as crystal, gushes forth from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1). This “pure river of water of life, clear as crystal” purifies all who receive it in faith, allowing it “free course” in them. It is the Spirit of Christ (Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:9).

It was this same Spirit that kept the church pure. Discordant elements came in, which, if allowed to multiply, would soon have made the church totally corrupt. For example, attracted by the generosity of the believers, who sold their possessions and laid down the proceeds at the feet of the apostles, to be distributed “unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4:35), Ananias and his wife Sapphira joined the company. They likewise “sold a possession,” but they brought only part of the price to the apostles, keeping the remainder for themselves while drawing their share out of the common stock equally with the rest of the believers.

“But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost; and great fear came on all them that heard these things” (Acts 5:3-5).

Sometimes the foolish question is asked, ‘Was Peter justified in causing the death of Ananias?’ A careful reading of the narrative will show the carelessness of such a question.

Peter had nothing to do with it. The Holy Spirit convicted Ananias of sin, and since he was impenitent, executed the penalty at once. The power by which sinners will be destroyed out of the earth, namely, "the Spirit of judgment and by the Spirit of burning" (Isaiah 4:4), is the same means by which sin is now purged out of the individual sinner who believes. It is true, as has been said, that it is the water of life that cleanses from sin; but God, who is "the fountain of living waters" (Jeremiah 2:13), is also "a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29).

The same thing that happened to Ananias also befell Sapphira a few hours later. "And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest durst no man join himself to them; but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)" (Acts 5:11-14). It was God Himself working in His own church, to keep it pure; and the method was effective. This is the only effective method.

It is plain that there can be no question as to whether such a method should be adopted now, since it was not "adopted" by the church then. The apostles had nothing to do with heresy trials and turning out unworthy members. Their sole business was to "Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2), leaving Christ to purify the church by His own Spirit. We may be sure that if the church, whether it be composed of few members or of a multitude, is filled with the Holy Spirit of God, it must necessarily be a pure church; no human action is needed for its purification. If the Holy Spirit does not fill the church, then it is equally certain that no act of man can purify it, since no act of man can bring in the fullness of the Spirit, the only Purifier.

All the efforts of men through centuries to keep the church pure have been only human substitutes for the Spirit. Rules and regulations have been laid down, defining just what the church might do and might not do, and announcing the penalties for violation of those rules; but all to no purpose; a mechanical church is not the building which "growth unto an holy temple to the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21). The papacy flourishes on elaborate system of rules.

Some one will ask, 'If the church has not the fullness of the Spirit, is some action by men necessary in order to keep it pure? Is it not better to root out the most flagrant cases of sin, and thus save the church from open disgrace?' That is to say, If we cannot have true piety in the church, should we not at least keep up the appearance of respectability? But what is the use of a substitute that does not accomplish that which the real thing effects? Is not a church that is consciously corrupt, and that knows that nothing but thorough cleansing by the Spirit can be of any profit, in much better ease than the church that is lulled into apathy and vain-confidence by the appearance of respectability? Is it a good thing to be 'pretty good'? Hear what the Lord says: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16). The methods commonly employed to keep the church pure, are essentially papal, because they affect only the outside appearance. They correspond to the efforts of zealous individuals to purify themselves by their own "good works." They only heal the hurt slightly; it is closed to all appearance, but within corruption is still festering. Nothing can give perfect soundness but "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). This means is available, the Spirit of God having already been poured out on all flesh, and so there is no need of resorting to substitutes.

"Behold, I will send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? for He is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness" (Malachi 3:1-3). Let the servant of the Lord pray, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7).

"Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2) leaving Christ to purify His church militant by His own Spirit, for it "enfeebled and defective, needing to be reproved, warned, and counseled, is the only object upon earth upon which Christ bestows His supreme regard" {TM 49.1}.