

January 20, 1974  
Acts 8:14-25 (N.E.)  
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### CAN WE RECAPTURE THE FLAME?

If one reads articles about religion in newspapers, magazines and books, he is aware that today, as in almost everyday, there are various movements going on which attempt to rekindle the flame of religious enthusiasm and recapture the divine-human relationship which once existed in the early church. Today those movements are going on both inside and outside of organized religion and it would be both interesting and profitable to examine them.

First of all, it is a strongly mystical movement, by which I mean it is an attempt to gain a unity or a oneness with God and is not primarily concerned, if at all, with church organization or ecclesiastical order. Indeed it often rebels against the church and accuses it of being a stumbling block standing in the way of this mystical union between man and God.

If one closely examines all of these movements, most of which are generated by young people, one will discover that nearly all of them are an attempt to go back to the early or the primitive church. The earliest Christians seem to have had a spirit and a power which we have somehow lost and would like to recapture. It is the spirit manifest at Pentecost 40 days after the death of Jesus when the disciples were gathered together in an Upper Room and received the power of the Holy Spirit, as they called it.

It is worthwhile to re-examine the early Christian fellowship to see if we can what precisely they did have and what caused them to lose it. But if one carefully examines church history, he will discover that in that early period of the church there was no fixed and well defined type of "apostolic Christianity". There were many varieties of religious experience, just as there are today. Paul was the first person to give literary expression to the faith, and as he was a strong personality and wielded a powerful pen, Paul's interpretation of the faith soon took precedence over all others. If, however, one labors to bring back or to discover first century Christianity in its pure and pristine form, he labors in vain. Paul himself was not consistent in his interpretations. For him also Christianity was in the process of becoming. The early church did not establish once and for all the doctrines and practices of the faith. Christianity then, even as now, was evolving. It is and always has been a living, growing thing, not a static and a fixed thing. If it ever becomes the latter then surely it will die and deserve to die. Many times in history it has been very close to that kind of death. But a new spirit and a new enthusiasm has always arisen and the faith has sprung into life again. That, I am sure, is because what men and women really desire and search for more than anything else is to be found only in religion. They must find it in a relationship with God or they will not find it at all.

It seems irrefutable that the thing which gave the early church its spirit and its power was a mystical experience in which the individual felt loved and bound together with other individuals, not by organization, but by a sense of the divine presence. It was a deep consciousness and awareness of God in the mind and in the heart. As long as this lasted the early Christians were possessed of an invincible spirit. Nothing could stop them. Nothing could frighten them. Then gradually, that which was spontaneous and enthusiastic, that which "turned the world upside down", changed into an ecclesiastical system; worldly, materialistic and weak. Almost miraculously, however, it could still produce out of its midst those great personalities which the world calls saints. What happened? What continues to happen? I shall let the Quaker mystic, Rufus Jones, speak for me:

"The church became an ecclesiastic system, an order of priests, because men lost the experience of and faith in the continued presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. So long as Christians knew that they were living and moving and having their being in God, they were all possessed of gifts, and they all had something to share. As soon as the sense of the Divine presence vanished from men's hearts, the religion which Christ had initiated underwent a complete transformation. Magic and mystery took the place of the free personal communication. The real presence of Christ was sought in the bread and wine and in the bath of regeneration, rather than within the soul itself. With this change of faith the administration of these rites became supremely important. Once the "Lord's Supper" had been a common and joyous meal, now it became a mysterious rite by which immortality was imparted. Once faith had been the soul's response to a Divine Presence. Now it became the acceptance of a communication once delivered to men and passed on through a regularly ordained line. As faith changed to a deposit of doctrine, and as the Supper became a magic rite, the authoritative official became a necessity."\*

## II

We Congregationalists are in a favorable and enviable position. Our religious life is encumbered with a minimum of ecclesiastical organization and machinery. Probably some minimum is necessary. But if we are wise we will always keep it at a minimum. The organizations of men seem almost inevitably to corrupt and destroy the spiritual fellowship man longs to have with God. The young people are right in rebelling against so much of it. Creed and dogma, rite and ritual, formal organization, can never, of themselves, answer the cry of the mind and the soul for meaning and purpose. They cannot tell us with assurance from whence we came and to whence we are going.

\* Studies In Mystical Religion

But mark this! Nothing we have said this morning means that we do not need the church. In the sense that the church is a fellowship of kindred minds and hearts searching for the reality and the truth of God, man desperately needs it. Without it he is very likely to fail. He needs the church as a fellowship, not as an organization. Men need the church for mutual help and assistance, for the sharing of their common life, their needs and their longings. Man is a social creature. In this sense indeed there is no salvation outside the church. You cannot be a Christian all by yourself.

A few may indeed become and remain transformed personalities who reflect the image of God because of experiences gained outside the fellowship. But most of us will find a significant and meaningful relationship to God within the fellowship and because of the fellowship, or we will never find it at all.

I do not mean to say that large numbers of people will gain sudden revelations of God's reality and of God's truth while working and worshiping within the church. What I do say is that here, within the fellowship is the place wherein we are most likely to find the inspiration and the motivation that can lead us to a dynamic awareness of God's reality.

### III

Yes, we can recapture the flame. But like the early Christians if we do so it will be because of the warmth of our love for one another, our mutual help and encouragement as we seek God together, our sincere desire to discover and to do the will of God whatever the cost.

That's what the young people are looking for today--something genuine, honest, sincere. They cannot tolerate, and none of us ought to tolerate, a facade, a veneer, a false front of religious piety, behind which there is nothing but a void of empty meaninglessness.

When Jesus threw the money-changers out of the temple and insisted, "My father's house shall be called a house of prayer," he told us what the church ought to be. What is prayer? It is communication between God and man. That is always what ought to be going on in the fellowship--communication between God and man--both ways, God speaking to man as well as man speaking to God.

What is it that teaches us to pray, that directs our vision beyond ourselves, that preserves for us the religious experience of the past, that offers us meaningful and significant moments of worship which draw us ever nearer to God, and offers us the comforts of religion in moments of sorrow and of loss? It is the fellowship of the church and without it we would be a sorry people indeed.

Can we recapture the flame? Yes, we can and we must. But we cannot do it alone. The fellowship ministers to us and through its ministry we catch a new vision of Christ. He becomes real to us, and following him, we find our salvation.

Francis Thompson, that great Roman Catholic poet, said it so beautifully. The setting of his poem is London, England but it could just as well be Milwaukee or Church Street, Wauwatosa:

"O world invisible, we view Thee,  
O world intangible, we touch Thee,  
O world unknowable, we know Thee,  
Inapprehensible, we clutch Thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,  
The eagle plunge to find the air--  
That we ask of the stars in motion  
If they have rumor of Thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,  
And our benumbed conceiving soars!--  
The drift of pinions, would we harken,  
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places;--  
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,  
That miss the many-splendored thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry;--and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry,--clinging Heaven by the hems;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water,  
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames."

Indeed, not in Gennesareth, but right here where you are.