Lesson 5: Asking Christ to Take Charge

"Pray for our church. We may not be able to continue beyond this Sunday," Rick Hulkenberg plead.

He explained that his church was in a tailspin. They had recently seen their interim pastor leave because of a conflict. Attendance was already declining and now it had fallen so low that the church could be forced to disband.

My burden for Rick and his church grew. I saw him at a breakfast meeting the next morning. "I think I can help your church. I have been able to help another church in a similar situation. I believe God can do it again," I said. Rick told the elders about my offer to help and I received an invitation on Saturday to meet with them on Sunday morning. The elders filled me in on the conflict that had arisen and the fire storm that had followed.

A "town meeting" had been scheduled for 4:00 p.m. that afternoon so the congregation could discuss the matter. There was, however, no clear sense of direction for that meeting nor for the future. I wondered, "How can unity be restored? How can this church experience a rebirth of its spirit?" So I shared with the elders my long-standing conviction that our Lord's promise to be in our midst when we gather in His name is the key to restoring harmony with God and one another. This promise in Matthew 18:15-20 seemed to be especially fitting for the problem this church was facing.

Therefore, I urged the elders to turn the "town meeting" into a prayer meeting. The usual prayer was not what I had in mind. I wanted the congregation to unite in meeting with Christ and ask Him to take charge. So I suggested that we arrange the chairs in a large circle. This would help us see ourselves as one body gathered around Christ in the center actively taking charge. They agreed and fervent prayer was offered for the meeting.

Unifying the Meeting

After an elder introduced me, I spoke to the congregation for about fifteen minutes. I reminded them of Satan's strategy to deceive, divide, and destroy the church. Therefore, we must seek unity and purity through united prayer. I outlined the following points for the meeting:

* We need to repent of our failure to devote ourselves to meeting with our Head in one accord in prayer.
* Then we will devote ourselves to united prayer and agree that we trust Christ:
  + a. to be present in our midst (Mt. 18:15-20).
  + b. to "sanctify and cleanse her (the church) with the washing of water by the Word" (Eph. 5:26).
  + c. to lead us into all truth so that we may become one as the Father and Son are (John 17:11, 20-23; Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35; I Cor. 1:10).
  + d. to teach us to keep the unity of the Spirit as we grow up together "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:1-16).

I pointed out that there would need to be follow up on this meeting so as to grow together in a deepening unity of the Spirit through united prayer. I promised that I would seek a meeting for reconciliation of the elders and the former interim pastor. The congregation unanimously voiced their approval for my proposal and we went to prayer.

Disaster Averted

For about 45 minutes one member after another led in prayer. Sometimes there was a wholesome silence. The Spirit was working. Finally, it became clear that our prayers had concluded, so I was ready to draw the meeting to a close. Then, off to my right, I saw a man stand up. "Wait a minute!" he interjected, "I want to say something." Angrily he blurted out, "if these elders knew how to lead the church, they wouldn't need to invite this man to come out here and help them!"

What could I say? What could the elders say? Here was a man trying to pour gasoline on the smoldering hot coals of strife. I knew only God could save this meeting. So I began to silently pray, "Lord, don't let this meeting break up in conflict."

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard one member after another respond with gracious words of peace. No one offered to join the attack. A brief discussion followed but the questions and comments were shared in a good spirit.

The meeting closed with prayer and my heart was overflowing with thanksgiving. Our Lord had indeed taken His place in the center of our meeting. He was actively in charge because all of us (except perhaps one man) agreed in an act of faith to invite Him to do so. We had found in Christ our common meeting place like children who have their common meeting place in their parents.

On Thursday evening we had the reconciliation meeting with the elders, the former interim pastor, and two other ministers who joined me in moderating the meeting. Again we asked the Lord Jesus Christ to take charge and we acknowledged our helpless dependence on Him to unite us in love under His headship. We paused in our discussion and united in prayer two times as the meeting progressed. Finally, near midnight the breakthrough came when one man asked for forgiveness and then others did likewise. We agreed on a letter to report the meeting to the congregation and declared that we would give only a good report concerning one another. Then we closed with the doxology and a benediction.

Asking Christ to actively take charge of us and expecting Him to do so because we trust His promise comes to grips with one of the greatest needs of the believing community today. Our life, character and mission as God's redeemed people is at stake!

Prayer Not Usually an Act of Faith

Christian meetings are usually opened with prayer asking the Lord to lead in our activities and decisions. But this is not usually an act of faith. There is no expectation that the Lord will intervene and do something special. When faith is exercised the meeting proceeds with confidence that the Lord has taken charge and that He will resolve conflicts among us, solve impossible problems we face, and transform all of us as we draw near to Him ready to honestly deal with sin and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

To understand the crucial importance of claiming Christ's active leadership, we must recognize that, while the Lord may graciously come to our aid when we call on Him in an emergency, we need to give Him His place as Head over our home and our church constantly. The church, which is the bride of Christ, must at all times zealously guard her loyal love and obedience to her Head. To do otherwise is to commit adultery against her Lord and to fall into bondage to her mortal enemies, the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

God created Adam free and made him king of the earth, but he sold himself and all his offspring into bondage to the great Deceiver (Eph. 2:1-3; I John 5:19). In the exodus God delivered Israel from bondage to a heathen tyrant and took active charge of the young nation, but they repeatedly fell back into bondage to sin and Satan.

Christ died, rose again and sat down at the right hand of God to *set the church free* and *give us dominion over Satan and all the forces of evil* (Eph. 2:4-6), but the church has repeatedly fallen away from complete devotion and obedience to our Head and plunged into spiritual impotence and bondage to the enemies of God. For example, the church at Ephesus forsook her first love for Christ and faced the loss of the light that empowered her witness (Rev 2:1-7). The Lord was outside the church of Laodicea. They had learned to be satisfied with a church program that ran quite well without Him and He was ready to vomit that church out of His mouth in disgust (Rev 3:14-22).

Many scholars believe that at the end of the age, Christ will be outside of much that passes for Christianity. Is that where we are in North America today? It is disturbing to learn that there is an epidemic of sexual immorality, family fights and church splits among Evangelicals. We should be alarmed at the Gallup pole conclusion that "In ethical behavior, there is very little difference between the churched and the unchurched."

Perhaps the most disturbing fact of all, is the lack of prayer meetings aimed at establishing and preserving the believing community under the active headship of Christ.

Keeping "Short Accounts with God"

It doesn't take much to grieve the Lord and drift away from our new life under His headship. To abide under His headship in the full enjoyment of His new life from above, we need to be alert to sin and deal with it promptly. I found this out one Sunday morning when I went to church early to pray for my ministry that day. I had spoken some harsh words to my wife and forgotten all about it. When I knelt to pray, words would not come forth. Then I began to think about Betty and those harsh words. I tried to brush this thought aside with, "Oh, well, she's all right. She knows how I am." But I still could not pray. Finally, I picked up the phone and called home. "I'm sorry for what I said. Will you forgive me?" Tearfully she answered, "Yes." Then once more Christ was free to take charge of both of us to do His work of grace in us.

When we expect Christ to actively take charge of us, we will be alert to times when He is grieved and silent. Expecting Christ to actively take charge of us is not an emergency "hot line" to heaven. This expectation should be our *habit.*Steadfastly seeking "those things which are above, where Christ is, sitteth on the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1) is the only way to live above our fallen world.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

* What practical difference does it make if we do not recognize Christ's Lordship over a prayer meeting versus if we do?
* Have you ever watched the Holy Spirit take charge of a couple, a prayer group, or a church and begin a work of reconciliation?
* Do you think we should only ask the Lord to take charge when a conflict arises?
* Do you think very many meetings open with prayer for divine guidance without expecting the Lord's active leadership? What difference does this make?
* Can angry conflicts give the Devil ground to enter Christian homes and churches and stay there? (See Eph. 4:26-27).
* What are some of the sins that grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:25-32)? How easily is the Holy Spirit grieved?
* What illustration was given in this chapter of the need to be sensitive to the Spirit's conviction?

RESEARCH FOR INSTRUCTOR

* Study the power of the headship of Adam and of Christ. (Read Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 11:3;15:25-28; Ephesians 1:19-23). Read Andrew Murray's book, HOW TO RAISE YOUR CHILDREN FOR CHRIST. Note the chapters on "The Family As God Created It", "As Sin Ruined It" and "As Grace Restores It".
* Consider the power of Adam's headship to make all his offspring sinful, selfish, and subject to death. "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20). Consider the power of Christ's headship to reproduce His own likeness in all believers and to seat us in power and authority far above all the unseen powers of darkness (Eph. 1:19-23).
* Now relate this to an act of faith in which we unite in asking Christ to take charge of us as a couple, as a prayer group, and as a church.
* If we don't live by faith under Christ's headship we fall back into subjection to Adam's ruined headship.