

LET THE BRIDEGROOM HAVE HIS BRIDE

(Please, read carefully John 3:25-4:3.)

“We’ve got bad news for you, John. All the people who were previously coming to you are now going to Jesus.” The bearers of that message, I feel sure, did not anticipate the response they received from the Baptist. No doubt they expected John to be distressed and jealous and spurred to urgent efforts to regain his waning influence. But, to their surprise, John was actually and sincerely joyful. The news they brought was an exciting confirmation that his divinely-given task was being successfully accomplished. “Didn’t I tell you?” he said. “I am only a forerunner, a preparer of the way.” Then there fell from his lips this prophetic and dazzlingly clear revelatory word, which needs to be shouted anew from the housetops in this our day; **“He who has the Bride is the Bridegroom!”** In other words, the Church, the Bride, belongs solely to the Lord Jesus Christ, not to you or me or anyone else. The sole purpose of the ministry of John the Baptist was to introduce people to a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, and to prepare the way for men and women to be united to Him and become His Bride.

I have written elsewhere more fully of the nature of John’s ministry, showing how he stood outside the established Jewish religious system and was “in the wilderness”, where, the Scriptures tell us, he grew strong in spirit, where the word of God came to him, and where he exercised his brief, but so significant ministry as people came out to him in these desert places. Although he had every opportunity at that time to institute an alternative system and head it up as the rightful leader of a powerful new movement, he did not do that. Rather he consistently and faithfully directed people, even his closest friends and disciples, to go after Jesus, while he himself faded from the scene. “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

In stark contrast to John were the leaders of the Jewish religious establishment. Remember, they had the Law and the Prophets. Their Scriptures were full of prophecies and types concerning the coming Messiah. They regarded themselves as the custodians of divine truth. However, when they saw and heard of the people following Jesus in ever growing numbers and learned of His amazing miracles of healing and authority over demons, far from seeing that as good news, they saw it as unmitigated impending disaster. The fabric of their carefully guarded religious system was being threatened. Their sphere of influence and authority was being eroded. Their reactions were of intense jealousy and anger, leading to a determined strategy to destroy Jesus. There is more than a hint of the first sinister springing of this in John ch.4 vs. 1-3, telling how Jesus withdrew from Judea to Galilee, when he realised that the Pharisees were aware of what was happening as the crowds now flocked to Him more than to John. How those vicious seeds of malice and envy grew to their full bitter fruit is described as John’s Gospel unfolds. We find in ch.11:53 that the highest men in the religious hierarchy are taking counsel how to put Jesus to death. In ch.12:9-11 they are seen even planning to murder Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead because so many were deserting them to follow and believe in Jesus.

There was no way these Jewish leaders were going to let Jesus have His Bride. They would stick at nothing to defend and retain their religious empire, and to deter these defections to Jesus. But in the end all their schemes, their political manoeuvrings and their concentrated hate came to naught. Their house was left to them desolate. The temple was destroyed. The religious rituals ended. The centuries—old system of worship was utterly dismantled and their people were either scattered over the earth or killed.

All this has some very relevant things to convey to us. Comparable to John the Baptist, there are those living “in the wilderness” outside and unconnected to any of the multiplied denominational church systems. Like John, many, probably most, of these “wilderness people” were parented by the church systems. (Remember John the Baptist was the son of a priest.) Many were leaders, pastors, elders, teachers in churches and fellowships. They have not been ejected by their churches. It is not because of “hurt”, as is often alleged, that they have withdrawn. It is because they have come to see in a new light the true nature of the Bride, and there has been an inner compulsion of the Spirit to come out. Now their burning concern is to focus solely on Christ, to centre in Him, to exalt Him as the one who is above all, who utters the words of God and gives the Spirit in abundant measure. **The cry of their hearts is the cry of John the Baptist, “He who has the Bride is the Bridegroom!” They are not seeking personal followers. They have no plans for setting up alternative religious organisations. They are not in the fashionable practice of church planting. What they are for is letting Jesus possess His Bride, letting Him be in truth the Head of His Church, filling her with the Holy Spirit and directing her in all things. They trust Him with His own Church and will not take it into their own hands.**

In contrast, with sorrow and shame, we may readily see in the church systems reflections of the attitudes of the Jewish leaders that we have described. You do not have to go far to find church leaders jealously guarding their territory. Overt denominational pride and ambition is often plainly evident. And there is much that is of the earth in the way of patently worldly means and methods. What unbiased observer of the present church systems, say in a typical provincial town in N.Z., where ten or a dozen or even more denominations may be competing in the religious marketplace, could honestly report that there, “The Bridegroom has the Bride”? No. it is as if the Bride has been cruelly dismembered, with each group holding a portion. Oh, they may try to reassemble her for special occasions like evangelistic crusades and special Easter services or the like., but how quickly they pull her apart again when these are over. Is it not true?

Do not misunderstand me. In the church systems there are multitudes of godly people, wholly desirous of following the Lord and committed to Him and who are truly members of the living Body and Bride of Christ. But I believe that for the vast majority of such there is simply a passive acceptance of the ecclesiastical status quo. I know that that was my own state for many years. They have not yet seen, nor can they imagine that there may be a better way. Acts 6:7 reports that in Jerusalem when “the word of God increased”, “A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” Their long contented acceptance of the status quo vanished in the light of the greater revelation of Jesus and His Way. But I do not imagine that their defection gave any joy to the Chief Priests and Elders!

For John the Baptist it was enough that the Bridegroom had the Bride, that people were joined to Jesus and not to him or some organisation named after him (John). Later on in Scripture there is a passage of sublime and penetrating revelation in Ephesians ch.5:21-33. There Paul portrays for us the Bridegroom, the Saviour and the Head of the Church, His Bride. He “loved her and gave Himself up for her that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by washing of water with the word, that He might present the church to Himself in splendour without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. He, The Bridegroom, “nourishes and cherishes” the Church because “we are members of His Body.”

That, dear reader is enough for me! To belong to the Bridegroom; to be taken up into the embrace of that infinite love, which went to the Cross that I might be redeemed, cleansed, set apart and

destined for glory; to be the object of caring love which nourishes me and cherishes me, along with every other member of the Body, which is His Bride. To be bound in exclusive New-Covenant marriage relationship with Him more than satisfies. I say “exclusive” for in that marriage there is no need for added loyalties, such as to a denominational church.

So, this is a call to leave the religious organisations and church systems to the rule and government of their Synods, their Assemblies, their Conferences and Councils. They, like the Jewish leaders, may strive jealously to maintain their systems and to defend their spheres of influence. They may be ambitious to extend their denominational boundaries, setting bold goals for the further establishment of churches bearing their particular label. They may stigmatise the “wilderness people” as rebels, individualists, emotionally hurt or even as heretics. But, their systems will all pass away. Ultimately they will all be disassembled. Like the Temple, not one stone of these ecclesiastical systems and all their offices and titles will be left standing upon another when that Day comes. Then only the living Bride will remain, standing in all her splendour, made ready for the marriage of the Lamb. Why then cling now to what is destined to be destroyed and disappear? Why not lay all that aside and simply cleave in love to the heavenly Bridegroom, rejoicing that He has His Bride? If you do that, then you will be able to sing with enthusiasm, and without hypocrisy, that great hymn of Charles Wesley:

“Christ from whom all blessings flow.
Perfecting the saints below.
Hear us who Thy nature share,
Who Thy mystic body are.

Join us in one spirit join.
Let us still receive of Thine.
Still for more on Thee we call.
Thou who fillest all in all.

Move and actuate and guide.
Divers gifts to each divide.
Placed according Thy will.
Let us all our work fulfil.

Sweetly may we all agree,
Touched with loving sympathy,
Kindly for each other care,
Every member feel its share.

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void.
Names and sects and parties fall.
Thou. O Christ, art Lord of all.”

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