



One of the tragic occurrences in the evolution of contemporary religion is the presence of "Churchless Christianity". The assertion that the followers of this Christianity believe is that it is the Lord Jesus Christ who saves us, not the Church. They no longer want or need a Church. They stress that "all you need is Jesus."

Few would dispute the fact that it is the Lord Jesus Christ who truly saves us. Few would dispute the scripture, "*For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus*" (I Timothy 2:5). Through this Mediator, a Church was established, which is His Holy Body. We who are joined to Him are joined to the Church. "*I will build My Church*" (Matthew 16:18) clearly points out the Lord Jesus Christ intentions for His Church. To deny the Church is to deny New Testament teachings.

Perhaps what brought on the evolution of "Churchless Christianity" was that people lost faith in their place of worship. Perhaps worship was no longer a priority where they attended church. Perhaps the church they attended no longer welcomed strangers, the poor and the needy. Perhaps the church functioned more as a charity

organization than meeting the congregations' spiritual needs. Perhaps God did not come first in the life of the Church.

The Lord Jesus Christ has truly blessed our beloved Coptic Orthodox Church. 2000 years of enduring Coptic Christianity attest to these blessings. With the passing mark of 2000 years of Christianity, I would like to reflect upon our Coptic Christianity and Coptic Church worship.

First, I am extremely thankful that as the immigration movement has increasingly moved toward the United States so many Coptic Christians have still maintained a steadfast faith and eagerly sought out a Coptic Orthodox Church in which to worship. Many come to the land of immigration without adequate funds for more than a beginning. It is my prayer that we always extend a heartfelt welcome to these newcomers into our congregation. In the New Testament's Church, the Lord Jesus Christ did not segregate the poor, middle class, and wealthy within the church. I do not recall reading anywhere that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself belonged to a wealthy family and lived in a palace, and yet He is known as "The King of Kings". St John clearly warns us against prejudice, "*Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment*" (John 7:24).

Secondly, I often hear, "We don't want to attract the wrong kind of people to our Church!" I hear this statement frequently from Church to Church, and I wonder whom do we want to attract to the Church? Those who are already in it? The Lord Jesus Christ whom founded the Church came to seek and to save the lost are we turning the lost out of His Church? Is this the beginning of "Churchless Christianity"? I certainly hope not. The Lord Jesus Christ went among prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor, and those with unclean diseases to teach the love of God. Are we doing the same? I believe these people would be classified as the NEEDY, don't you agree?

Our earthly job is to love and accept others. For some reason, we have a tendency to evaluate other people. Are they good or bad? Stupid or smart? Rich or poor? Well educated or illiterate? It is not our job to judge others. *"You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, My judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent Me"* (John 8:15-16). Also in St Matthew's Gospel, we can read, *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get"* (Matthew 7:1-2).

Third, people enter into "Churchless Christianity" due to their belief that the church they attended had

become a house of merchandise. Everything from Girl Scout cookies to cleaning products from school projects was being sold in the churches on Sunday. This would be disenchanting to me if this occurred in our Churches. This exchanging money for personal goods in the church is NOT the purpose of church. I strongly believe worship is the purpose of the Church. The same holds true for our bookstores. Bookstores exist simply for the purpose of enriching our Christian lives through better understanding within literature. Books should be distributed to cover costs and supply additional books. No exception. It is my prayer that this is the bookstore servant's intent.

Fourth, I would like to address the contemporary way of "exchanging money within the church". This is normally done in the form of bingo, lotteries, carnivals and festivals. Many people honestly believe that fund-raisers help to "donate money" to the Church. The definition of donation is "the act of GIVING". The concept of donation does not include the above functions. I recall a specific passage in St Matthew's Gospel that gives instructions about charitable deeds. It is written, "*But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable*

deed may be in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:3-4).

I do not recall Moses buying and selling to build the Tabernacle. Moses collected donations and when the donations were sufficient he collected no more.

Exodus 36:3-7 tells us, *"They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled craftsmen, who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left their work and said to Moses, 'the people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done.' Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: 'No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.'" And so people were restrained from bringing more because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work."*

When the Lord Jesus Christ fed the 5000 he fed them spiritually. He sent the disciples out seeking food for the multitude not money. Luke 9:13 states, *"But He said to them, "You give them something to eat."* And they said, *"We have no more than five loaves and two fishes, unless we go and BUY food for all these people."* Jesus fed them from the five loaves

and two fishes. All ate and were satisfied. No one went away hungry. The crowds followed the Lord Jesus Christ because they were eternally fed. Even when reading the Early Church Fathers I do not recall Feast Days set aside to buy and sell, toward mobilizing and spreading the Gospel.

Many say these activities are great for evangelism. When asked of an American convert within our church what should be the focus of our evangelism efforts, the reply was the History of the Church, the longevity of its Christianity, and the SAINTS! I tend to agree with this and would like to focus all the hard work that accompanies these activities toward a more serious end product. We have a convention that addresses evangelism. Can we put forth a united effort toward evangelism?

In all Church gatherings, practice hospitality to others, particularly those on the outside looking in. When you welcome others visiting the Church you are welcoming and serving God. There is power in serving. The Lord Jesus Christ called to them and said, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant"* (Matthew 20:25-26). To achieve true greatness, we do not have to misuse the blessings

that God has bestowed upon us. Rather, we need to use these blessings to serve God and others.

The only source of money within the church should be heartfelt donations. The Lord told Moses, "*Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give*" (Exodus 25:2).

Therefore, historically, donations have always been voluntary offerings.

Many often tell me I cannot donate "that much money" to the church. Our society is focused on more is better. Bigger is greater than smaller. But sometimes bigger starts smaller and grows. The Lord Jesus Christ put before them another parable: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

I will also remind those of what St Luke's Gospel tells us, "*...Give and it will be given unto you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back*" (Luke 6:37-38). Our motive in giving should never

be to get back. Rather the point is that if you give all you can give God will respond in full measure.

If you are unsatisfied with your giving, provide service as an additional gift. It is a blessing to take care of our Church, the grounds, and to serve in it. There are many capacities to serve whether in cleaning, maintenance, visiting the sick, reading the Bible to the elderly, calling a visitor or someone who has been absent from services, volunteering in the Bookstore, or babysitting in the cry room. I am quite sure any Abouna would gladly find a task for one willing to serve. When Moses inspected the Tabernacle he saw, "*that they had done the work just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them*" (Exodus 39:43). The Israelites had not only donated gifts, but faithfully given time and talent in building the Tabernacle and all its furnishings.

Many say to me, "Other Churches are exchanging money within social activities, why can't we?" I would like to challenge you to put the Lord Jesus Christ as the Center of all church activities. Take away the money exchanging in social activities that are Church related. Study and become more spiritually understanding of Christian charity, donations, and gift giving. All the hard work and the love in ones' heart should be channeled into a clearer understanding of the scriptures set forth. Be a

willing example for other churches to look up to and follow. Share your understanding with others. II Timothy 2:7 tells us, "*The Lord will give you understanding in all things.*"

Moses and the prophets set forth many examples for us to follow. The Gospel of St Luke says, "*He said to them, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'*" When we open our hearts and minds we will be able to understand the examples the great men of the Bible have set forth for us. The Lord Jesus Christ in all His great and unsurpassing wisdom faced many trials and tribulations. His words and actions were wise. His lessons were timeless.

I pray that as a diocese we will all meditate on the challenges the Lord Jesus Christ overcame in His establishment of the Church, and to remember that the Lord Jesus Christ came not to destroy the work of Moses and the Prophets but to fulfill and amplify their works. As a congregation make an undivided commitment to continue to put your heart into the Church, its worship, and its spirituality. The Lord Jesus Christ compacted all the laws of Moses into a new commandment: "*We are to love God with everything we ARE and HAVE*" (Matthew 22:35-38).

May the love and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ
abide in you all.

Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern
United States