

Chapter 1

“Empties Drifting By”

In his book *Abundant Living*, E. Stanley Jones mentions an incident that took place in Texas during a severe drought. One day some clouds appeared, and someone asked a ranger if he thought they would bring a shower.

After looking up at them for a few moments, the ranger shook his head and answered, “No, they’re just empties drifting by.”

“How many of us,” Stanley Jones writes, “are the moral and spiritual equivalents of just that! When people need the refreshing rain of abundant living so desperately, we are just ‘empties drifting by.’” So when worldlings look at many professed Christians, they see only a reflection of themselves. When they listen, they hear only an echo of what they themselves have said.

The tragic weakness of the church today is not that it is splintered - unfortunate as that is. Rather, it is that the church has tried too hard to please the world. It has been so intent on coming to terms with the world that it has nothing to offer to the world. When worldlings unite with the church, they find that they are still among worldlings.

The kind of power the church has lost cannot be restored by church merger. To be sure, alliance brings power - compelling power. This was the power wielded by the ancient ecumenical church. It compelled obedience and homage to its tenets.

EMPTIES DRIFTING BY

The power that attended the apostolic church - the church in its purity - was a different kind of power. It was an impelling power.

The living witness and dying testimony of those early Christians made worldlings aware that Christians possessed something they did not. And they wanted that "something," even if possessing it meant the loss of all possessions or even life itself. Increasingly, the subjects of Satan left his domain and joined the followers of "the way, the truth, and the life." John 14:6.

"The way" was a far different way than the world trod. "The truth" was a far different truth than the world believed. "The life" was a far different life than the world lived. Because of this, when the world looked at the church it did not see its own reflection. It saw the image of Jesus. When the world listened to the church, it did not hear its own words. It heard the words of Jesus. When worldlings looked at Christians, they saw "that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13) - and they marveled and were moved.

Such was the power of the apostolic church that turned the ancient world upside down in less than a generation. And this at a time when Christians were a hated, hunted minority group - when gross spiritual and moral darkness prevailed.

Politically, it was the day of the Caesars. Rome ruled with an iron hand. Extortion, intolerance, and cruelty were everywhere. The masses were poverty stricken. Only the few were comfortable and wealthy. In mines, workshops, and ships, slaves - shackled to their benches and driven by the lash - did the work instead of machines.

EMPTIES DRIFTING BY

Religiously, it was a time of rampant paganism and emperor worship. Much of the persecution suffered by the early Christians resulted when they refused to render to the emperor the honor that belongs to God.

Illiteracy was widespread. Hospitals were nonexistent. Such means of communication as we know today were not even imagined. The gospel was carried on sandled feet down dusty roads.

So clearly did the early Christians let their light shine that even when they were cast into prison, their jailers asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Acts 16:30.

So brightly did they glorify their Father in their daily lives that many persons of wealth and distinction gave up their treasures and status symbols, accepted estrangement from family and friends, and cast their lot with the outcasts.

So dedicated and consecrated were they that kings, listening to them, trembled. One visibly shaken king - Agrippa - said to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Acts 26:28. It must have been these Christians that United Methodist clergyman Dean M. Kelly had in mind when he said, "When a handful of wholly committed human beings give themselves fully to a great cause of faith, they are virtually irresistible."¹

The scandal of the church today is not disunity - as the advocates of alliance zealously proclaim. Rather, it is that there is too little Christian witness - too many "empties drifting by." Should all the churches of Christendom unite, it would not restore the power that the church has lost, for this kind of power does not come by outward realignment or by the strength of compulsion.

EMPTIES DRIFTING BY

In the chapters that follow we shall consider why the impelling power of the apostolic church has largely departed - and how we can help to restore it.