

Private Participation

By Dee Bowman

The Bible is perennial. It never has to be reviewed and revised since it is pertinent to any age and applicable to any culture. It says the same thing to a nation with a Socialist government as to a free Democratic society. In fact, the Bible is so fixed by God that it will tolerate no change and condemns any effort to alter it in any way (II Jno. 9-11).

The Bible is primarily for persons. Everything in it is intended to speak to an individual's relationship to God-- how he can respect Him as God, how he can please Him--and man's relationship to man--how he can respect Him, how he can be of service to him. It has a very personal message (Matt. 22:37). The faith it causes is personal--between a man and God. Its various requirements call for personal decisions--those that come because a man has been stricken by some moral obligation. The promises it affords are intimate, based on a person's confidence that God will do what He has said. Nobody can obey the law of God for someone else. There is no such thing as substitutionary obedience.

True obedience comes only when the person under obligation decides in his own mind to react to what is required of him. In short, the Bible is a private communication between a man and God.

However, while the Bible is intended primarily for individuals, it also contains instructions for how those persons are to act in groups. It tells them, for instance, how each person is to function in society, what his obligations are to government, and especially how he is to act in association with others in what is called "the church," other saved people. It should be carefully observed, however, that even when it addresses things having to do with behavior in a congregation, it begins with instructions to the individual regarding his own attitudes and conduct toward the group things. Even then, his attitudes and actions are directed toward the persons that comprise the group and not to some nebulous "corporation" of some sort.

For instance: when a person observes the Lord's Supper he is to do so only after having examined himself (I Cor. 11:28). When a person gives of his means, he is to do so having purposed in his own heart. And when a man sings, he should make melody in his own heart. Collective worship is acceptable to God only as the individuals who offer it are acceptable to God. Solomon says, "keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God." He says "thy foot," not their's. It's every person's job to be ready to worship. Neither is service measured in corporate terms. Each person's service is his own. True, it may have an effect on others, it may even be a part of what they do, but it is, in the final reality, his own service.

Each person chooses each day whom he will serve (Josh. 24:14). He may have influence from others-- and often does. And rightfully so, for it is the obligation of each person to put himself at the disposal of others as he has opportunity. But just because a group of individuals does something for the good of others does not necessarily mean

that because you are identified with that group, you have done it. You can't serve by proxy. There are some things, too, that call for your participation because of what they do for you, not just what they do for someone else. Participation is more than giving money, although it may include that. It is giving yourself. Notice, I said giving yourself.

Far too many folks think that because a certain congregation has a "good name," or is known to be active and functional, they are part of it. But to really be a part, you have to do your part. And that means more than just giving into a common treasury. If you are able, you need to participate. That means doing something, getting involved, partaking.

It seems to me that three things are necessary for personal participation:

Decide how you can help. Every person has his own talent (Matt. 25). Before you can manage yours, you must be aware of what it is. You know what you can do. Think about how you can use that to help with the plan being considered. Or if the occasion calls for it, do it by your-self. Many an opportunity has been lost because someone had to call someone to help get it done. Consider the good Samaritan. He just did what he could—and with no help. And remember, every talent is important or God would not have given it.

Make up your mind to do it. Nobody can make up your mind. Actually, as Jesus said, (Matt. 16:24), you must "take up your own cross." Other people may have an influence, of course, but, in the final reality, your choice is yours and nobody else's. Your cross is your's and nobody else's. Consider others, certainly, but be independent. Choose for yourself.

Run the risk. Sure, you may get embarrassed. You may even have to hurt a little—maybe even a lot. But do it any-how. Yes, there may be some who can do it better than you, but does that absolve you of your responsibility or remove your obligation? I think not. More than that, don't let diffidence rob you of the personal satisfaction of having done what you could. Remember, for the Christian, forgiveness, service, pain, and satisfaction are all personal. Be prepared to share them—personally