

The Believers' Need for the Church and the Communion of the Saints:
A Modern Application of Octavius Winslow's Work
Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul

Introduction

As it is natural for water to run down hill, so it is natural for a Christian to grow in Christlikeness through the institution of the church, and the habit of Christian fellowship. However, the believer who fails to avail himself of the manifold benefits of the church, and the communion of saints will naturally begin to decline spiritually. In Octavius Winslow's book *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*,¹ Winslow repeatedly reminded his readers that failure to love, adhere, and participate in these benefits manifested an *existing* spiritual declension, and *furthered* spiritual declension.

My aim is first of all to examine Winslow's warnings and show that both the church and the communion of the saints are essential to Christian growth. Secondly to give practical applications as to how a minister and session can help the soul struggling with this issue. The format will follow the nine specific topics discussed in Winslow.

Incipient Declension

Winslow's first chapter is designed to awaken the reader as to the silent beginnings of backsliding. He reminds us that it begins in the soul of believers when an unloving attitude toward Jesus Christ is fostered. But backsliding also begins when a Christian is indifferent in his heart towards other Christians. There is an obvious organic unity between a love for Christ and a love for the saints. Winslow wrote, "The more entirely the heart is occupied with the love of Christ, the less room there will be for uncharitableness towards His saints. It is because there is

¹ Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993).

so little love to Jesus, that there is so little towards His followers.”² Winslow correctly asserts that because believers are one in Christ, they should not “stand aloof from the one body,”³ or “refuse to recognize the Father’s image in fellow believers”⁴ due to disagreements. There should be kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness (Col 3:12-13) because of Christ’s love towards us, and because the church is one. If this is absent in the believer, it indicates “a decay of grace, a waning of the life of God in the soul.”⁵ The church is the “body of Christ” (Eph 1:22-23), hence disliking a fellow believer or Christian fellowship in general, in the final analyses, is a *result* or *outgrowth* of disliking Christ.

Loving the saints and seeking to live in harmony with them is the duty of every Christian because they are one in Christ, and therefore, united together. Winslow was correct to pinpoint that our love for the saints is connected to our love for Christ. Thus, believers who no longer have a love for fellow Christians must understand the vital union which exists between each other because of their union with Christ (WCF 26:1 & 29:1). Secondly, believers must, as Winslow wisely advises, focus on the glories of Christ.⁶ Last of all, believers must be taught that the church, which consists of fellow believers is Christ’s body, and that all her members form part of that body.

Declension in Love

Love, of course “is the spring-head of all the kindred graces.”⁷ But in order for this love to express itself rightly and maturely it must have a proper focal point, namely God and all that He is. The greatest commandment of all is to love God, because as God is loved in His fullness, human love is properly directed. Augustine wrote, “He is a man who does not love what should

² Winslow, 19.

³ Winslow, 20.

⁴ Winslow, 20

⁵ Winslow, 20.

⁶ Winslow, 36.

⁷ Winslow, 41.

not be loved, but loves what should be loved...And if God is to be loved more than any man, everyone should love God more than himself, and men are to be loved for the sake of God.”⁸

But this love can decay in the believer. And Winslow recognizes the verity that this declension in true love is real when a love for the brethren is gone. He wrote, “If we love God with a sincere and deep affection, we must love His image wherever we find it.”⁹ Including in those who profess faith with us. If a believer’s love for God is cold, Winslow notes, the characteristics of unconcern, sectarianism, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and selfishness will rule the heart.

Love for the brethren is of course an essential mark of a Christian. We are commanded to love our brothers (1 Jn 4; Jn 13:34; 15:12; Matt 22:37-39). We are to exhibit love toward the saints (1 Pet 2:17; 1 Jn 5:1; Gal 5:13), and provoke each other to love (2 Cor 8:7; 9:2; Heb 10:24). By our love for each other we show the world that we are Christ’s disciples (Jn 13:35). And no where is this love more clearly exhibited than in the church of Christ. In and through the church love for the saints is practiced through giving, caring, and supporting one another (Rom 12:15ff; 2 Cor 8-9; Col 2:1-2). Love is the bond of union which unites the believer to Christ, and to each other (Col 2:2; 3:14).

This love must be cultivated in the church today. Through the teaching and preaching ministry the church must continually remind the people of their responsibility to love one another, with the love of God in the gospel as *the* motivation (Jn 13:34; I Jn 4:7-8, 11). Secondly, through the teaching and preaching ministry the people must be reminded of God’s will concerning their relationship with each other. God’s will is that we share one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2), visit those in affliction (Matt 25:34-40), pray for one another (James 5:16), meet each other’s needs (Rom 12:13), be patient with each other (Eph 4:2), and watch over each

⁸ Saint Augustine, *The Library of Liberal Arts Series: On Christian Doctrine*. trans. by D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980.) Pg, 23.

⁹ Winslow, 54.

other (Heb 3:13). Thirdly, the church together with the family must practice hospitality and open their homes in order to practice loving one another. Hebrews 13:16 gives a clear mandate in this regard.

Declension in Faith

As love is essential to the Christian life, so also is faith. Winslow correctly understood the vital role of faith in the believer's life. It involves the mind and heart, brings security, brings courage to the pilgrim, and provokes a believer to expect God's blessing (Heb 11:6). Faith is part of a believer's armor, and is a purifying grace according to Acts 15:9, and Acts 26:18.

However, just as a Christian's love can decline so faith can decline as well. One of the major reasons for this declension is the failure to attend the very means of grace designed to build faith. We know that prayer, and the reading of the Word build up the faith, but we also know the great power the church has to build up the faith. The communion of the saints, the preaching of the Word, and the observance of the sacraments of the Lord nurture Christian faith. Therefore, it is radically necessary that Christians involve themselves in these activities.

First, the communion and fellowship of the saints strengthens faith. In Chapter XXVI, 1-2 our Confession states that Christians are,

united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man, and II. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

The reason for this communion of the saints is our union with Christ. Because of this union all those who are in Christ are part of the church and receive "gifts and grace" for the

benefit of the whole church. These gifts and graces are given for the mutual good, and edification of the believer, which includes edifying his faith (1 Cor 12:8ff).

Secondly, the preaching of the Word builds faith. The church, the Christian, and the Scriptures go together because Christ and Scripture go together.¹⁰ This is why the ministry of the NT church was a ministry of the Word (Acts 4:31; 5:42; 6:4). As the Word was proclaimed and the sense given, God's people grew in their faith (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20).

Thirdly, the sacraments as a means of grace build faith. They are the visible Word of God through which we see, taste, and feel the promises of God. Therefore, as we partake of these physical elements our faith in the promises they convey is strengthened. By faith we baptize (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:42), and by faith we commune with Christ in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:14-17; 11:23-30). And as we do so our faith is fortified.

However, if we neglect the church we forfeit these blessings, and the result will be a starvation of our faith. How can we encourage people to give their whole hearted allegiance to Christ's body and avoid this starvation? I think Winslow gives two insightful points which will help a minister or a session strengthen their people's loyalty to Christ's church. First, believers must be encouraged to examine themselves in the light of the Word so as to discover whether or not they really believe in the necessity of the church's ministry (Eph 4). Secondly, believers must be reminded not to make faith itself a god. Some souls are so concerned to have purity of faith and doctrine, that they neglect the very means of the church. Their love is not the body of Christ, and their faith is not in Christ; rather their love and faith is focused inward due to their obsession for the "true faith." These souls need to realize that though no church is perfect, every true church has Christ as her Head. As a result, all believers can come to church and have their faith strengthened by the means mentioned above because of the grace of Christ.

Declension in Prayer

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, *Living In Christ's Church*. (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1986.) Pg, 132.

Having fellowship with God in prayer together with other Christians is a joyful experience. Those who are not ashamed to pray in public or with other believers is evidence of a strong love for God, and a strong attachment to the church and fellow saints. Winslow remarked that if a person misses prayer meetings or avoids praying with the saints, “the spirit of prayer has declined in him.”¹¹ But Winslow also notes that this declension in prayer, is accompanied with a declension in Christian fellowship.¹² I agree with Winslow. Those who will not pray with other believers, generally do not enjoy Christian fellowship as they should. To clarify this point a distinction must be made. There are those in the church who are afraid to pray with other believers due to immaturity in the faith. These souls enjoy Christian fellowship and need to be encouraged and taught how to pray so as to overcome their fear. But, on the other hand, there are those who simply refuse to pray with others. These souls are not generally zealous for Christian fellowship.

Dealing with this problem is difficult because prayer is such a personal issue. Church programs do not generally help cultivate a warm sincere public prayer life. Apart from challenging the people with God’s will in regards to prayer, the most beneficial thing a minister or session can do to advance a healthy public prayer ministry in the lives of the saints is to point them to Christ, and challenge them to remove the hindrances to prayer. These hindrances are unsubdued sin, unrepentant sin, worldly-mindedness, vain conversations, brotherly disagreements, and lack of Christian fellowship. If these are confronted and removed by the power of the Spirit, a healthy public prayer life will begin in the believer and life of the church.

Declension in Connection with Doctrinal Error

In Winslow’s fifth chapter, he warns that “if the tendency of truth is to promote holiness, then the tendency of error is to promote unholiness.”¹³ Secondly, Winslow warns that those who

¹¹ Winslow, 98.

¹² Winslow, 98.

¹³ Winslow, 118.

involve themselves in mystical pietism, where experience becomes the criteria of truth, will place experience over the authority of the Word of God. God's people must hear these warnings, for erroneous doctrines constantly parade themselves before the church, and the attraction to experience constantly tempts the church to place it above "dry" truth.

The safety of the church protects believers from both of these dangers. Christ is the corner-stone, and Head of the church (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4-6; Eph 1:22; 5:23), therefore, the truth of God resides in her as she adheres to the Word of God. The church is the pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim 3:15). Over against false teachers and false doctrine the truth of God's word is sustained by the church. The church is the true assembly of God where God's presence abides in love and truth (Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22-24). God has given to the church officers to equip, edify, and protect the saints (Acts 20; Eph 4). All of these benefits of the church prevent error in those who faithfully attend and submit to her care. Chapter 25, paragraph two of the Westminster Confession of Faith tells us that, "Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto. (I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11_13; Matt. 28:19_20; Isa. 59:12)."

Knowing the danger that accompanies error, what must the church do to inform believers of the need to stay under her protection and guidance? First, she must confront the individualism of our age by asserting that the Christian faith is founded upon the apostles and prophets. Secondly, her leaders must understand biblical polity and be aware of their responsibility to lead the people. Thirdly, church discipline must be administered against those who teach heresy or schismatic doctrines. Last of all, they must hold Christ the King before the people making them aware, through the Word, that the church is the body of Christ.

On Grieving the Holy Spirit

Many of us have encountered refusals. We know what it is like to have the word “no” said to us. Grieving the Spirit involves the believer in saying “no” to God and His Word. Christians can grieve the Spirit at home, work, or play by pride, disobedience, lack of love, and disregard for God’s will. But believers can also grieve the Spirit in their attitude and action toward the church, and the communion of the saints.

I will deal with the church first. Winslow points out that “the Spirit is grieved when Christ’s work of grace in the soul is either denied or undervalued by the believer.”¹⁴ From what we have seen above the church is a means of grace, and a protector of our souls in the truth. Surely, to avoid the means of grace she offers, and reject the protection she offers is to grieve the Holy Spirit. The church the “body of Christ” (Eph 1:23; Col 1:24), into which believers are united by the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). There is only one body, and one Spirit who has come in fullness upon His church in these last days (Acts 2), therefore to reject the church is to deny and undervalue the church and this grieve the Spirit.

Secondly, to refuse to be involved with the communion of saints is also to grieve the Spirit. As mentioned under the section on love, love for the brethren an essential mark of a Christian (1 Jn 4; Jn 13:34; 15:12; Matt 22:37-39; 1 Pet 2:17; 1 Jn 5:1; Gal 5:13; 2 Cor 8:7; 9:2; Heb 10:24; Jn 13:35). And this love is manifested through giving, caring, and supporting one another (Rom 12:15ff; 2 Cor 8-9; Col 2:1-2). Passages such as Acts 2:24; Phil 2:1; 1 Jn 1:3, and 7, give us the NT paradigm of Christian fellowship. To say no to this fellowship is to grieve the Spirit, and resist the will of God.

What must the church do to confront this problem? Winslow again gives us clear direction. Those who persist in grieving the Spirit by failing to submit to the help of the church, and the blessing of the communion of the saints must be challenged to examine themselves to make their calling and election sure, for how can a person continue to disregard God’s church

¹⁴ Winslow, 133.

and people, and expect to enter God's Kingdom. The weapon of the Word must be used in this examination for it alone can cut to the heart of the backslider who forfeits the church and God's people.

The Fruitless and Fruitful Believer

In this chapter Winslow makes the distinction between a "fruitless believer," and a "fruitful believer." The fruitless believer is someone who only professes faith but is truly dead in sins because he does not bring forth fruit. The fruitful believer is someone who truly is in Christ and consequently brings forth fruit. I want to focus on the fruitful believer in connection with the church and the communion of the saints.

The fruits God sovereignly produces by His Spirit in the believer are primarily given for the benefit of the church, and other believers (cf WCF 26:1). 1 Peter 4:10 must be the motto in the topic of fruit bearing. It reads "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." The spiritual gifts listed in Rom 12:3-8 are given to individual believers are for the benefit others. Spiritual gifts are "*an ability given by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform the specific function within the Body that God has assigned to each of us.*"¹⁵ This fruit bearing is nurtured in the church as the pastors and teachers teach the Word of God in order that the people might perform the ministry God has given them. Winslow used the analogy of the fruit and vine given in John 15, and said that all who are truly united with Christ will bear fruit. But he highlights that those who bear fruit are "pruned" that they may bring forth more fruit. Clearly this pruning involves the trials of our faith, but it also includes God's work in us through the ministry of the church. Through the ministry of the church, believers are built up in the proper use of their spiritual gifts, namely serving the church and others.

¹⁵ Jerry Bridges, *The Crisis of Caring: Recovering the Meaning of True Fellowship*. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1992.) Pg, 107.

That soul which refuses to use their spiritual gifts in this context is in spiritual declension, and must be taught and trained to exercise what God has given him.

The Lord, The Restorer and Keeper of His People

For this paper I have included Winslow's last two chapters under one heading. Winslow eloquently explains the restoring mercy of God by highlighting the fact that God's love, power, and gentleness is through Christ. Winslow likewise expounds upon the keeping power of God by reminding the reader of the glorious faithful promises of God. This combination of God's restoring mercy and keeping power gives the minister and session tremendous encouragement to implement the suggestions mentioned above in order to restore those who disobediently either avoid, or frown upon the church and the communion of the saints.

With regard to God's restoring mercy, the minister and session must remember that God encourages backsliders to return by giving them His gracious invitations through the Word preached, through ministry of the officers, and through the prayers of the church. As Winslow wrote, "the character of God is such as encourages the return of a backsliding soul. In the invitations He has given, he urges them upon the ground of *what He is...a merciful God.*" There is not greater place that God calls a backslider back to Himself than in the church. Therefore, the leaders can be encouraged that as they teach God's people in the Word, God will constantly call believers to love the church and the communion of the saints.

With regard to the keeping power of God, God through the Word, sacraments, and prayer of the church will strengthen a believer's assurance. In connection with this paper in particular, God will strengthen a believer's assurance as to the necessity of the church and the benefit of the communion of the saints. This happens because the central figure of the church and the communion of the saints is Christ. As Christ is presented to believers, trust in Christ's Person, power, and rulership will strengthen this assurance. As Christ is presented, His mediator-ship

will be understood, thus strengthening the assurance that the church and fellowship of the saints are essential. Last of all, as Christ is presented His kingly rule will be felt, further strengthening the assurance of the absolute necessity of the church and the communion of the saints.

Thus, as a minister and session seek to build up the people in their love for the church and the communion of the saints, they need to preach Christ and His gospel. As this is done a preserving, keeping work of God occurs. The agent is the Holy Spirit, and keeping bond is love.

Conclusion

Water always runs down a hill, and Christians will grow as they attend to church and the communion of the saints. But Christians do not always love the church and Christian fellowship as they should. This manifests itself in a lack of love for the brethren, the church, and the means of grace. It manifests itself in a weak immature faith. It can be detected when believers refuse to pray with other believers or fail to attend special times of prayer in the church. It is seen when believers are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine because they have left the protection and truth of the church. This lack of love for the church and Christian fellowship involves grieving the Spirit, and failing to use the gifts God has given them. The answer to their problem is found in the Word of God, which sets forth Christ. In ministering to these souls in declension, programs and gimmicks will not call them to love the church or their fellow saints. Only Christ as He is presented in the Word will *aid in preventing* this declension, and *affect repentance* to those who have declined spiritually.

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