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COME O BREATH!

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CHAPTER I

The Subnormal Church

It is always difficult to define that which is vital. It is easier to define a corpse than to define a baby. "There is a relative finalty about a corpse, but there is an immeasurable potentiality about a baby." It is not easy to define the true spiritual condition of the Lord's people in every part of the world. There are many encouraging signs; yet no leader would disagree with me when I say that we are not living the robust, radiant, powerful life of dynamic Christianity.

The vast majority of Christians are living a sub-normal Christian life. The New Testament characteristics of power invincible, joy unspeakable, glory immeasurable, and peace incomprehensible, are strangely lacking in their lives. The Christian experience of the Church is not deep, intense or vital enough to meet her own needs, let alone the needs of the world. "*A grasshopper Church can never become an effective witness to the strength and majesty of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.*" We are so sickly and feeble that we are not able to discharge the functions for which we exist. We are as powerless as a burnt-out volcano; as useless as a deserted ship swinging at anchor, covered with barnacles, awaiting destruction; or an old locomotive rusting on the sidings. We have adopted a policy of self-pity. The result is, we have the invalid's groan instead of the warrior's shout. We are absolutely powerless before the appalling conditions of the world today.

The Church must herself be saved, or she cannot save the world. This is a law corroborated by every genuine movement of God in the past. The Church cannot give what she does not possess. The measure of the outward must always be a measure

of the inward. It is the Church that is unbelieving, apathetic and worldly. The currents of divine magnetism cannot flow through her to a needy world, except in the smallest quantities. She has lost, to an alarming extent, her absorbing and conductive power. Her absorbing faculty is her faith, but what an exhausted energy it has become! *Her prayer, which is her faith expressing itself in words, instead of being the cry of a spiritual giant, is but the wail of an infant in the night.* Her visible life is far more a profession, an outward respectability, than a holy, attractive, world-conquering, Christ-reproducing reality. Before the world can be made a better world, the Church must be made a better Church. How can she be "terrible as an army with banners", when many of her soldiers are either in sick beds or sitting by the camp-fires, or holding parleys with the enemy?

We must enter a crusade against the growing worldliness of the Church. This is robbing the Church of its purity and power and placing it in an embarrassing position, so that she cannot proclaim the whole counsel of God. Worldliness only requires one condition for its success, and that is that we do not fear it. *The Church never had so much power over the world as when she had nothing to do with it.*

What hurts me most is that the world does not oppose us. We are so feeble that it just ignores us. In the eyes of our sworn foes we simply do not count. The world could not ignore the first disciples. It might imprison them, beat them, stone them, slay them, but one thing it could not do — it could not leave them alone. Why is it that the world is on such good terms with us that it can gaily pass us by? Is it not because we have signed an armistice with the devil, compromising instead of contending; fraternising instead of antagonising; surrendering our principles and suppressing our convictions?

Furthermore, the demons do not fear us. You remember the incident in the nineteenth chapter of Acts, where the man who

was demon possessed overcame the seven sons of Sceva, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. The demons still say to us, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye?" The Church has flung a smoke-screen around her true spiritual condition by building enormous church edifices, and by spending vast sums of money in promoting and popularising her conventions and campaigns. Her leaders bask in the spotlight of Hollywood glare. The noise of the machinery of propaganda is louder than the still small voice of the Spirit. The fame of men and movements is greater than the fame of the Redeemer.

Again, there is so little spontaneity in our life and labor. Much of the results are those of sound advertising and magnificent organization. When the structure of organization is taken down, often times the results are very meagre and disappointing. *The glory of Pentecost was its spontaneity.* The Revival at Pentecost was a spontaneous, evangelistic effort. There was no advertising of Peter and the apostles as special speakers. There was no planned method of evangelism. The supreme fact of that first and purest revival was the reception of the Holy Spirit by a waiting Church. The inevitable consequence was expressed in one line, "And in the same day there were added unto them three thousand souls." Hallelujah! the fire of God fell. Fire can always be relied upon to bring a crowd. *Sensational methods and startling advertisement are unnecessary to announce a fire; it announces itself!*

It is not the special spurts of the Church that count, but the steady, vital ministry of the Church in her everyday life. As holy Jowett has so beautifully said, "It is not the new birth which initially arrests the world, but the new and glorified life. It is not, therefore, by spasmodic revivals, however grace-blessed they may be, that we shall excite the wonder of the multitudes, but by the abiding miracle of a God-filled and glorious Church. What we need, above all things, is the con-

tinuous marvel of an elevated Church, set on high by the King, having her home 'in the heavenly places in Christ', approaching all things from above, and triumphantly resisting the subtle gravitation of the world, the flesh, and the devil."

THE CLARION CALL comes to us from Isaiah's prophecy: "Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: . . . shake thyself from the dust; arise, sit down, O Jerusalem; loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion." The Church is like a great giant sleeping. She is like Jonah asleep in the storm. She is like the disciples asleep in Gethsemane. The great need is for trumpeters. Many dear saints love the exquisite sermons and jazzy quartettes, but hate the trumpeter of the resurrection. Believers do not want to be aroused. We must awake to our high-calling of God in Christ Jesus. We must awake to our responsibility of Christian stewardship. We must awake and possess our blood-bought possessions in our Risen Lord.

Notice the pathos in the challenge and rebuke, "O Jerusalem, the holy city! O captive daughter of Zion! Rouse thyself, clothe thyself, cleanse thyself, shake thyself, loose thyself." What a terrible condition to be in — how God-dishonoring! "Captive daughter of Zion"! What a contradiction! The Church has compromised and dragged the dear Name of the Saviour in the dust. Therefore she is in captivity. *The sin of the Church is that it is earth-bound.* "Shake thyself from the dust." Many are longing for a tidal movement of the Spirit to sweep through our churches, but we do not need to wait for that. The remnant of old cried to Jehovah, "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old." (Isa. 51: 9). God answered them with this pathetic rebuke, "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion." (Isa. 52: 1). It is not the Lord who is asleep, but His people. We must repent and get right with God, and

humble ourselves to the dust in sack-cloth and ashes. "Put on thy strength, O Zion." Strength is at our disposal. The garment of power is hanging on the door of Pentecost. (Acts 1:8). Power is at our disposal. *We read the menu, but fail to order.* "He that believeth on Me, out of him shall flow rivers of living water." We must appropriate our resources. They are not dried up. *The Church's potential is the same as in apostolic days.*

There is a glorious church edifice in Florence which came fresh from the hands of builders and artists about the middle of the fifteenth century. Its severe outlines were relieved by delicate tinting on roof and walls; its choir and chapels were lit up with priceless examples of mural decoration. A century passed, and then Vasari broke in upon the scheme of the decoration by the erection of his hideous stone altars. Some of the frescoes were obliterated, others were mutilated. Those which remained were buried under a coating of whitewash. To hide the vandalism, it was judged necessary to whiten the walls also, and the deep roof, while the spring of the arches was tricked out in a dull ochre. Then, that the glare of light might be reduced,, nineteen large windows were built up. And so, obscured and dishonored, the great church stood during three hundred years. It was known by the Florentines that the coarse distemper hid the superb frescoes of the Giotto Agnolo Gaddi and Maso di Banco, but no one was able to say how the covering might be removed without destroying the exquisite harmonies underneath. At last, some eighty years ago, a way was found and tried — costly and tedious — but practical. And now, in various portions, the church edifice begins to shine out in almost its pristine splendor. The work progresses slowly; there is still much to do, but one may at least trace the design of the builder and the motive of the artist.

The Church of Jesus Christ, the pillar and ground of the Truth, came in its pure glory, unsullied from the hand of its

Divine Artificer. But all too soon, its splendor was darkened and its beauty stained. Yet, there have been times of refreshing from the Lord, in which the intrusive unsightliness has been in part cleared away. And at such times one begins anew to realise what the Church of the First-born in the days of the great Pentecost must have been. What strikes one most forcibly in reading of the vitality of the Church of the First Century is not so much the glory of her conquests, as the fact that it was secured with resources that appear to us altogether inadequate for a task of such magnitude. A number of plain men, for the most part insignificant and unknown, with the most slender equipment, against fierce persecution and hatred, "turned the world upside down." Wave after wave of persecution broke over them, and yet they emerged victorious. The message of the Acts is that the bare simplicities of Christianity are the things that count. The glory of the victorious Church was that men proclaimed the Gospel with holy unction and certified it by holy lives. I am deeply persuaded that, judged experimentally by our daily life and practice, much of the mental attitude and spiritual poise of the modern Church is pre-Pentecostal, and in this is to be found the secret of our common weariness and impotence.

*"With one accord" within the upper room
The faithful followers of Jesus met;
One was the hope of every waiting soul,
And on one object great each heart was set.*

*"With one accord" within the upper room
The Pentecostal power was outpoured;
Then forth as witnesses possessed of God,
To preach the resurrection of the Lord!*

*"With one accord" within the house of God
A hallelujah song is daily raised,
As with the voice of one, from vocal hearts
Jehovah's name is glorified and praised.*

*Pour down Thy Spirit once again, dear Lord;
Our cry goes up to Thee for "latter rain";
Unite Thy people as the "heart of one",
And pentecostal days shall come again!*

E. MAY GRIMES