

ARE
Written
STANDARDS
for the
CHURCH?

THE ISSUE OF whether written standards are a legitimate part of church life is not new, but the recent emergence of groups in various localities from a practice of having had written standards to having done away with written standards has brought the issue to the fore for many of us. Is their position right? Do written standards stifle spiritual life? Are they additions to the Word of God? Are they, as alleged, the fleshly attempts of man to do the spiritual work of God?

Looking at this from a different angle, are there things in the larger groups from

which these no-standard congregations have emerged which have precipitated their departure? If, in other words, the position of no written standards is wrong, does the blame for this error lie wholly with the groups that have gone to it?

Ultimately, what we believe about written standards grows out of our understanding of the spiritual life of the believer and the life and operation of the church. Therefore, issues more basic than written standards will of necessity enter into this discussion.

Before I state my position and the goals of this writing, I wish to point out as others have before me that error is often founded upon particular truths. I am distinguishing here between truths as individual propositions and TRUTH, the larger body in which these propositions find their context. We are always in danger on controversial issues of gaining insight into a particular truth and so focusing on it that we remove it from the body of truth. A proposition of truth apart from the body of truth easily turns into error. As A. W. Tozer has written,

2

“Truth is one but truths are many.

Scriptural truths are interlocking and interdependent A statement may be true in its relation to other truths and less than true when separated from them.”¹

In the matter of written standards for the church, the Scriptures are clear that there is danger in over-regulation. “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” (Acts 15:28). The danger of written regulations becoming excessive and thus a burden is the foundation stone of those who argue for no written standards. And it is a real danger. It is truth we must not ignore. But it is a truth which taken in isolation from TRUTH becomes error.

On the other side of the issue, to recognize that the early church did take a collective stand on practical issues and applications of principles is likewise Scriptural. The danger of ignoring cultural pressures, the danger of the weak being downtrodden by the strong, the danger of shortchanging collective wisdom by making each man decide issues for himself—these dangers are real also and likely influenced the apostles in their

decision in Acts 15. But it must be recognized as well that the validity of a collective stand is a truth, but not the whole truth. To focus on the validity of standards can be a route to error as surely as to focus on the dangers of written standards. History is full of wrecks where churches and individuals fell into the ditch on one side of an issue by trying to avoid the mistakes of those who went into the ditch on the other side. Either way, the object of moving down the road is lost.

In stating my position, therefore, I wish to make several things clear. I in no way want to provide ammunition for a war between ditches. My goal is to be Scriptural. While I must discuss the trouble in both ditches, my heart's longing is to see the church moving down the highway, not gazing at ditches. Trying to honestly look at error on both sides of the Scriptural position opens me to the possibility of being misread. I want to be clear. In refuting the error of overregulation, I am not refuting the Scriptural position of collective decisions directed by the Spirit of God. In refuting the error of no regulation, I am not

defending the error of overregulation. I call you to read with integrity and to refrain from reading or quoting piecemeal in ways that distort what I say.

May I warn all readers that when our position is held in reaction to others more than in pure devotion to Jesus Christ, we will surely work more havoc than good. Please consider that this danger is real whether we are reacting to truth or to error, whether we are doctrinally right or doctrinally wrong.

No administrative system by itself guarantees true spirituality for the church. To have or not to have written standards is not the ultimate criterion whereby we know the church of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that any administrative system will do. As I will state more clearly in a moment, I believe that standards, written or unwritten, are part of a Scriptural administration. But I do not believe that having written standards automatically means a congregation is Scriptural and under the direction of Christ. On the other hand, neither will I discount the spirituality of every congregation that does not have written standards