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## The Iniquity of Betterness

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# THE INIQUITY OF BETTERNESS

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**Y**ou could hear whispers of it at the Toronto General Conference session: “Next session, the Third World’s going to take over!”

Some said it with pride, as if they, at last, were going to exercise their rightful control. Some said it with fear, as if no one could do it quite so well as they had.

I listened and pondered. . . .

In the summer of A.D. 29, Christ ordained 12 Palestinian gentlemen in an act that has been described as the first step in the organization of the church. “Gentlemen” is a charitable description. Two, the “sons of thunder,” were spiritual racists who wanted, as they told the Lord, to take over. Another was an extorting traitor from society’s scum. Still another an intemperate and mercurial fisherman capable of bravery, cow-

ardice, dishonesty, or vile language, as the situation warranted. Other nonentities completed the dozen whose major group characteristics included not only their inability to get along together but their belief that they were superior to others.

I call their affliction “betterness,” an affliction ranking among humanity’s juiciest bones of contention and causes of division. As translated in Toronto argot: “Now it’s going to be our turn to take over!” Or, from those expecting to be disenfranchised, “We can’t, of course, expect them to handle things as well as we!”

## In the Beginning, Betterness

Betterness is not always bad;

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*Betterness became a problem when Lucifer conceived of service for the sake of recognition. Betterness subtly corrupts ministry, leaving us to conclude that we serve because we are better, and you receive not because you are needy, but because you are better.*

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Scripture is full of it. "I haven't made it yet," says Paul, but "I'm trying to get better." (See Philippians 3:12-14.) "We need to leave the basics of Christianity and move on to something better," he says in Hebrews 6:1. In fact, that book overflows with betterness. Jesus is better than the angels (1:1-14). He is better than fallen humanity (2:1-18), better than Moses (3:1-6), better than the Abrahamic-Levitical priesthood (5:1-10; 6:16-7:28). So why should betterness be a bone of contention, either in the New Testament church or the church of our day?

The answer is both simple and profound: because God was not afraid to create beings with the desire to better themselves, a desire that carries the potential for excess. Hear his words to one once bathed in radiant glory: "You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom. . . anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. . . . You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you" (Eze. 28:12-15, NIV).

The word *wickedness* here means moral distortion. How did it hap-

pen? "Your heart became proud on account of your beauty" (Eze. 28:17, NIV).

The creature of this account was virtually the most gifted of all eternity. Across the realms of light he moved, the sleekest and the swiftest, shone the brightest, sang the sweetest, understood the most. But somewhere during his trips from galaxy to galaxy, he invented competition. And when Earth's creation was put into the hands of another, he invented sin. And when the new creation was invested with a creative gift denied him, he devised betterness—he would show the universe that he could run the world better than its Adam, better even than its Creator.

#### God's Ideal for Service

How different from the philosophy of heaven, where "justly mine" has never been the sentiment of a pure heart. Looking unto Jesus, we see that it has ever been the glory of God to give. "I seek not mine own glory" (NKJV), but the glory of him who sent me, said Jesus (John 8:28; 6:57; 8:50; 7:18). In these words he

set forth the great principle that is the law of life for the universe. Christ received all things from the Father, but he took to give. And through the beloved Son, the Father's life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all. And thus through Christ the circuit of beneficence is complete.

Any law, then, that would modify the law of selfless service is contrary to the constitution of heaven. The idea that what I receive should be shared according to who is better and who is worse, is contrary to the law of life for the universe. The idea of directing resources to those who deserve recognition is called selfishness. Examine it and you will understand how betterness became a problem when Lucifer conceived of service for the sake of recognition. Betterness subtly corrupts ministry, leaving us to conclude that we serve because we are better, and you receive not because you are needy, but because you are better.

### Our Way of Service

Humanity has devised a vast variety of systems based on deserving and undeserving, of betterness and worseness. Often they are based on recognizable characteristics. For example, Monday, October 2, 2000, was the first day after the Olympics. In the school cafeteria that day, I talked with one of my favorite peo-

ple, a student named April, whose mother is from Honduras. She asked, "Did you see when the Cuban was winning the race? I think it was the 110 hurdles, but I can't remember. And Mexico came second in diving. We were in the rec center, and we were rooting for every Spanish country's team. We were saying, 'It's close to home. It's close to home.'" The point: The closer you get to me, the higher your quality score.

Someone puts your relative down. Says he drinks too much. Maybe he does. Maybe he doesn't. It doesn't matter. What matters is, when someone puts down your family, someone has to step up. I fight my brother, and that's OK. But if my cousin fights him, we fight our cousin. And we and our cousin fight the rest of the tribe, and so on. We and our tribe fight the world. And we wonder when the fighting will stop, while we speak of "one nation under God, indivisible. . . ." *Indivisible?* When everything from city, state, and region to size of nose, alma mater, skin color or length of fingernails, is a basis for categorization, a means of determining betterness, of deciding who may serve and who shall be served? In God's original order there was no such dilemma. In our "enlightened" era, there is.

### Betterness and the Church

How does the foregoing relate to the church indivisible? Here's how:

The Greek term for church, *ekklesia*, is not necessarily a wondrous heavenly notion. Read Acts 19:23-32, and you've got your *ekklesia*, folks—a crowd of first-century major and minor domos whose discord reveals their ignorance of any specific purpose for being together. Clearly, there is something wrong with this *ekklesia*. The pagan town clerk knew there was something wrong. They were not, as they were expected to be, “one nation under God, indivisible.” There were segmentations and categories and betternesses and worstnesses in this *ekklesia*. People were permitted or not permitted to serve depending on their betterness or worseness—depending on how they fit into categories. Like Alexander, who sought to make a defense to the assembly. But when they recognized he was a Jew, they shouted him down. The sole basis was that he was not “better”—not from the right category, although he, too, was part of the *ekklesia*.

Truth is, it is not hard to be an *ekklesia*. But Jesus had something more in mind when he founded his church. What does *ekklesia* stand for, anyway? A called-out group. Out from where? At least two New Testament passages answer:

1. From Babylon, the confusion of false religion (Rev. 18:1-4; 14:8-12).

2. From the company of unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

We give considerable attention to

the contrast expected between belief and unbelief, which is surely desirable. But what about the difference between confusion and order, between calculated scheming and jostling for the higher place or the better condition, and the meekness and lowliness of Jesus that gives rest to the soul? What about the difference between political scrambling for power and people indivisibly united in self-denying, self-sacrificing service to God and his needy world; living by the Father for the service of others—the law of life for the universe? The crucial question now is not the difference between my church and your church (We go on sun days. You go on moon days. They go on rain days.) The question is, What about the difference between Babylon and the remnant?

### Back to Toronto

So here we are, back at the Toronto General Conference (GC) session. There executive secretary Elder Bediako, previously president of the West African Union, was elected a vice president of the General Conference. Had you sat in on the sessions, you would no doubt recall discussions on the relative significance of membership and finances to the strength of the church. Some wished—and still do—for greater respect to be shown to the number of members. Others highlighted instead the invaluable contribution

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Very Babylonian.*

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of certain sectors to the organization's financial viability.

It was in this context that some predicted a third-world takeover at the next GC session, and others bemoaned the impending loss of clout. It is in this context that this must be said: Whatever its other characteristics, the *ekklesia* that determines its leadership on the relative strengths of its various political segments cannot best serve the purpose of God's remnant church. In God's design, leadership is nothing if not spiritual. (See Ephesians 4:11-16 and 1 Corinthians 4:7.) As the Spirit of God distributes spiritual gifts, his church must minister according to that distribution. The numbers thing must not be confused with spiritual gifts. “There are so many of us, therefore we deserve X or O” is very Babylonian. “We contribute so much; you need to show appreciation for that fact by permitting us to control Z or A.” Very Babylonian.

#### The Betterness Ribbon

We would still be in trouble with Heaven if all we argued was that we

should be appreciated for the size of our contribution. When Lucifer determined that Heaven's appreciation did not match the size of his contribution, he was in trouble. So we jeopardize God's program even if we simply convince ourselves that we need or deserve recognition for what we do. (See 1 Corinthians 4:7 again!) Then call to mind all those stories of church members who wouldn't do any more Harvest Ingathering because nobody gave them ribbons the previous year. And we are more than one step down the road when we insist on a degree of administrative control to confirm that we are valuable.

Hear Peter's vision of God's church—a chosen race. A royal priesthood. A holy nation. A people who “proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9, NASB).

Who's “you”? Whomever. Red and yellow, black and white. If there were green people, them too! Straight haired and bent haired and in between. Big givers and little

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givers. First worldly or second worldly or third or fourth worldly. We are not supposed to be worldly. We are supposed to be godly—so godly that a world confounded by our witness will know that it is not human, but divine.

“Look at those people who keep God’s company! Look and see how they love each other! First worldly? Second worldly? Why, they don’t even seem to belong to this world! What great neighbors they make! What great ambassadors for Christ!”

In them, the prayer of Jesus on that Thursday evening—before they hung him out to dry in a sun that hid its face and refused to do it, or even to view it—that prayer, I say, has been answered: “That they all may be one, Father, as I’m one with you and you one with me.” It’s like Matthew Henry suggests of the first Christians. They took a name meant as ridicule and made it their badge of honor. They were no longer first Jews or Samaritans or Greeks or Romans. They all belonged to the same nation

now. They were Christians.

And so should we be. Let’s get out of Babylon and let sweet Christian love get Babylon out of us. Let’s glorify God and confound the world. One nation, having all things in common. One nation under God, where Peter, Didymus, Thaddaeus and Bartholomew, Romans, Jews, Palestinians and Arabs, tax collectors, Pharisees, Guyanese and Americans, Greeks, Turks, Pakistanis and Indians, Serbs and Kosovars, Koreans and Japanese, Republicans and Democrats—all can live together, can praise and worship together, can plan and execute together, for the glory of God and God alone, for the doing of his will on earth as it is in heaven, for the hastening of the day of Christ’s return to take us all to be with him, from every tribe and kindred, tongue and people, reigning forever there as we have, by his Spirit, learned here below, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all!

P.S.: If we’re still here, won’t it be wonderful to see the accord at the next General Conference session! □