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CHRIST'S INNER CIRCLE

There came then His brethren and His mother and standing without, sent unto Him, calling Him. And the multitude sat about Him and they said unto Him, Behold Thy mother and Thy brethren without seek for Thee. And He answered them, saying: Who is My mother or My brethren? And He looked round about on them which sat about Him and said, Behold My mother and My brethren. For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother and My sister and mother [Mk 3:31-35]

Have you wondered lately why your church leaders are treating you as an outsider? A cabal has put the leader beyond the reach of the other members of the congregation. You are no longer consulted before decisions are taken, even when you are supposedly a key committee member. Unless you are a member of the small group close to the leader, spiritual messages from any one else are never relayed to the congregation. In words, deeds and, even, mannerisms, they let you know that they are above reproach. They are too spiritual to sin! Then, you wonder if Christ came for the sinners or for the self-righteous who need no Saviour.

Usually, when I have such an issue to counsel on, I go back to the Lord Himself. I try to find out from His earthly ministry what He did. That was how I stumbled on three Apostles who constituted what one can call Christ's inner circle. When you mention the Twelve Apostles, these three names pop out effortlessly: Peter, James and John. They were the only Apostles who witnessed the Transfiguration [Matt. 17:1]. During Christ's Passion in Gethsemane, Jesus took only these three beyond a point to keep watch with Him [Matt. 26:37]. On His Ascension into heaven, Jesus handed over the leadership of the young flock to Peter [Jn 21:15-17]. Although Mary's children (by Joseph) were available [Mk 6:3], Jesus left their mother in the care of John [Jn 19:26-27]. James was the first Apostle to be martyred [Acts 12:2].

In today's lesson, we shall study the background of these three people who were so close to Jesus, and learn the appropriate lessons to guide the management of our congregations.

1. Before their conversion

- (a) James and John were brothers, the sons of Zebedee [**Matt. 10:2**]. They were fishermen by profession and Peter's business partners [**Lk 5:10**]. They had a thriving business because they could afford paid employees [**Mk 1:20**]. As astute businessmen, they had acquired some managerial habits (good and bad) which they later put to work, as we shall see.
- (b) Peter was introduced to Jesus by his brother, Andrew [**Jn 1:40-42**]. He was not highly educated [**Acts 4:13**], just like his business partners. Married [**Mk 1:30; 1 Cor. 9:5**], he lived by fishing [**Matt. 4:18**]. Previously known as Simon, the son of Jonah [**Matt. 16:17; Jn 21:15**], Jesus changed his name to Cephas (Peter) which means "a stone" [**Jn 1:42**]. Where he was strong, nobody could beat him. For example, he had the energy to fish all night even without a catch [**Lk 5:5; Jn 21:3-4**], or he could row for hours against strong winds [**Mk 6:47-48**]. However, when he faced overwhelming odds, he was cowed, afraid and vulnerable. He denied Jesus thrice [**Matt. 26: 69-75**], but as soon as he realized his sin, he wept bitterly [**Matt. 26:75**]. He could be impulsive where others were introspective, such as when he rebuked Jesus for wanting to go and die in Jerusalem [**Matt. 16:21-23**], or refused Jesus to wash his feet [**Jn 13:6-10**], or struck the ear of the chief priest's servant when Jesus was being arrested [**Jn 18: 10**]. Ever inquisitive, Peter asked Jesus to let him walk on water only for him to be afraid when he was sinking. I wonder what happened to his fisherman's swimming skills! However, he was a born leader and he made sure everyone around him knew it! For example, he asked or answered Jesus most of the daring questions [**Matt. 17:4; Matt. 18:21; Matt. 19:27; Mk 8: 27-29**].
- (c) James and John were surnamed "Boanerges" (the sons of thunder) by Jesus, an indication of their fiery disposition [**Mk 3:17; Matt. 10:2-4**]. They were the ones who asked for Christ's permission to command fire to come down from heaven to consume the Samaritans for refusing to receive Jesus on His way to Jerusalem [**Lk 9:54**]. They were also ambitious and manipulative. With their mother's connivance [**Matt. 20:20-28**], they asked to sit on the right and left of Jesus when He would come to His glory [**Mk 10:35-44**]. When that became known to their colleagues, it caused a major row, but for Jesus' timely intervention [**Matt. 20: 25-28**]. No wonder that even after Christ's Resurrection, Peter's suspicion of John's ambition could have led him to ask Jesus what was going to happen to John if he (Peter) was going to be martyred [**Jn 21:20-21**].
- (d) John did not hide his special place with Jesus. Everywhere in John's Gospel, he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" [e.g., **Jn 19:26; Jn 20:2**]. He was the one that Jesus sent to prepare the Passover [**Lk 22:8-13**]. During the Last Supper, John was "leaning on Jesus' bosom" [**Jn 13:23**], or "lying on Jesus' breast" [**Jn 13:25**]. In fact, Peter had no choice but to pass questions to Jesus through John [**Jn 13:24**].

From the foregoing, we see that Peter, James and John were very much like the rings of deputies that surround our church leaders today. They were conniving, ambitious, full of themselves, envious of one another, etc. Thank God for the Holy Spirit! Let us see the difference He made in their lives after their conversion.

2. After their conversion

- (a) Peter, the not-so-educated, not-so-coherent, impulsive and quixotic leader became eloquent, coherent, fearless, calm and humble [**Acts 2:14; Acts 4: 5-13; Acts 12:6-7**].
- (b) The scheming, ambitious sons of Zebedee fell in line behind Peter and accepted him as their leader [**Jn 20:3-8; Acts 3:1-7; Acts 4: 1-21; Acts 8: 14-25**]. In fact, neither the two nor Peter was any longer interested in church administration. They appointed 7 deacons to take over while they concentrated on spiritual matters [**Acts 6:1-6**].
- (c) After Herod Agrippa had killed James [**Acts 12:2**], Peter and John demonstrated their new nature by bringing James, the Lord's brother (son of Mary by Joseph) to replace him, and they became the pillars of the early church [**Gal. 2:9**].
- (d) More importantly, the new inner circle extended to Paul, a late convert and a well-known former persecutor of Christians, "right hands of fellowship" [**Gal. 2:9**]. That made a significant difference in the rapid spread of Christianity.

The lesson we learn from the above is that only the Holy Spirit can transform church leaders and their deputies to give up earthly vanities in their relationships with the congregation.

3. Conclusion

With the Holy Spirit, every true worshipper is a member of his/her congregation's inner circle by virtue of being members of Christ's inner circle. Remember, He has chosen us [**Jn 15:16**]. He has assured us that those who obey the will of His Father are His brothers and sisters. Much more, He has also called us His friends if we do whatever He commands us [**Jn 15:14**]. He is a friend who sticks closer than does a brother [**Prov. 18:24**]. Alleluia!