

PAGEANTRY VERSUS SPIRITUALITY

By Rev. W. Edmund Smith

Pageantry in the church is no innovation; it had its origin in the Middle Ages when the church had gradually become paganized by the rise and development of the Roman Catholic hierarchy with all its material pomp and splendor and elaborate liturgy which had a tendency to extinguish all spiritual reality and devotion. An apostate church tried to make up in religious sentimentalism what it lacked in real spiritual power. Pageantry and all theatrical performances are rooted in a sickly sentimentalism that weeps or goes into ecstasies over the sham, but has very little response to the real and the true.

In her miracle, mystery and morality plays, the apostate church was imitating heathen devotees, who at their religious feasts worked themselves up to a frenzy of feeling with their bacchanalian revelry that consisted in dances and theatrical performances which made what they called "truth," grip the minds and hearts of the spectators. So the church sought to Christianize and sanctify what might be a good thing for the propagating of the Kingdom of God. In what is called the "Dark Ages" these religious plays abounded. It was the effort of the church to edify and spiritualize the people by re-enacting upon the stage historical events contained in the Old and New Testaments. To make truth more interesting and palatable, one part of truth was mixed with about ninety-nine parts of imagination, amusement and recreation.

These plays at the first were generally simple, consisting of a dialogue between a few speakers, and bound together by a narrative sometimes in verse. But gradually they became more pretentious. Great stages were erected, and a multitude of actors in brilliant costumes played their various parts after long practice. One play took in the whole scope of human history from the Creation to the Final Judgment, taking many days for its performance. In one play God Himself was impersonated upon His throne, high and lifted up, surrounded by a great company of holy angels, while another vividly portrayed the horrors of hell, with all its blackness and wails of lost souls.

Such plays as these were common in the churches in France and England from the 11th to the 17th centuries. No doubt such spectacular representations of Biblical truth made a great emotional impression upon many of the superstitious onlookers. But it was the same kind of an impression that Rome makes today with all her pageantry, fake miracles and ostentatious display of numbers, wealth and ceremonies. In these so-called sacred plays the sacred was often turned into a burlesque by numerous clowns and buffoons, who played a most entertaining part.

The Mystery play and the Miracle play were followed by the Morality plays, in which virtue, courage, patience, love, etc., were personified, with the idea of incarnating these virtues in the hearts of the spectators. From such religious and ethical sentimentalism has sprung up the modern theatre with all its slime and filth, under the profession of teaching truth and reality for the good of personal character. Holy religious sentiment, which lives by faith and endures as seeing things that are invisible, is supplemented by an erotic sentimentalism no higher than the

licentious orgies practiced by Greek and Roman devotees.

But one may ask, "How about the Passion Play of Oberammergau?" This play had its origin in a Bavarian highland village in 1633. On the cessation of a plague the people of that village promised God they would, out of gratitude for their deliverance, perform every tenth year Christ's passion—a vow which ever since has been regularly observed. The scenes in Christ's ministry, from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to His crucifixion, are vividly portrayed. Peasants of the village are trained to perform their parts, and about two hundred actors are in the pageant. The fame of this play has gone far and wide, and a multitude of unspiritual Christians from all lands regulate their visit to Europe so they may take in this wonderful pageant. They say that it is most realistic, from Christ on the Cross down to Judas.

Yes, such acting may meet the approval of those who would like to know Christ after the flesh, and mistake sickly sentimentalism for robust faith and devotion to Jesus, but to the sanctified child of God who has had a revelation of the full-orbed deity of Jesus, and enjoys continual consciousness of the indwelling presence of the Christ, the whole thing looks like the grossest kind of sacrilege. It is crucifying the Son of God afresh and putting Him to an open shame. The play looks like a Judas affair, especially when we know that the entire town of Oberammergau has become commercialized and the atmosphere that surrounds the place is that of the theatre as to reverence, and Wall Street as to devotion and sacrifice.

The person that confesses he has to go to such a place to get a larger appreciation of the death and sufferings of Christ, confesses his dead spiritual condition, and his ignorance of the inner working of the Holy Spirit. But some say, "They keep this thing sacred because they observe it only every ten years." Yes, they have the good sense to know they can make more out of it once in ten years than they could ten times every year. Frequency would bring the thing into contempt with its very familiarity. Once in ten years keeps the play sort of sacrosanct, and captures the imagination of the religiously sentimental. Oh, there may be some who go to Oberammergau and weep when they see a lot of impious people mimic the passion of Jesus, but such folks have forgotten that they were ever purged from their former sins and made real children of God by faith. They forget that when the disciples saw Jesus die upon the Cross they were confused and confounded, and not till they had been baptized with the Holy Ghost did they really understand Bethlehem, a manger, Calvary and the Resurrection. Then they sang, "Though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creation; old things have passed away and behold, all things have become new." The time will come when all Christendom will become disgusted with the burlesque and the commercialism of Oberammergau and all such mumery that insults the Holy Ghost, in daring to re-enact the awful solemnities and realities of our Saviour's death.

And from these plays have sprung up our semi-religious pageantry in the church, that is intended to interest and amuse the young who cannot be attracted by a deeply religious programme. A young preacher told me that after a revival, when a number of young people have been brought into the church, he gives them

AN URGENT APPEAL

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The passing of our president has made the present situation doubly grave. The leader is gone; but the work must go on. The task is just that much greater. I am asking that our people get the burden of what I have tried to say upon their hearts, and then do as God directs. If the Lord says give, whether it be large or small, give as unto the Lord. If He says pray that someone else's pocketbook be opened up, pray in faith. Even the smallest amount can be of benefit. But whatever we do, let us accept the burden and do our part to see God's cause through.

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something to do in staging a religious pageant, that may portray the progress of his church along all lines. Think of young converts being diverted from prayer and praise and the seeking of souls, to the devoting of many hours of time in the midst of unspiritual gaiety, practicing for the play. And then think of the expense of the costumes and the absolutely unspiritual atmosphere that pervades the whole thing. Oh, yes! it will catch the crowd and may interest carnal young people. But real born-again souls that love to pray and desire victory over the world, the flesh and the devil, cannot be fed on such cheap stuff. It is all a reverting to the pageantry of the church in the "Dark Ages" that copied the whole thing from heathen practice.

When a great church at one of its conferences stages a great pageant to make more impressive its progress and success, we know that it is making progress backwards so far as real spiritual triumph is concerned. It may say "we are rich and increased in goods and have need of nothing, but know not that they are poor and wretched and miserable and blind and naked." Young people who participate may be lively, vivacious and moral, but they are strangers to the deep things of the kingdom, and so are they who sanction and are entertained by such stunts. And the church that puts on such affairs may build a big church edifice and have a big organ, and get a considerable crowd of respectable folks, but it is no longer the real church of God. It has been captured by the world and worldly ideals. It has a sickly sentimentalism, but lacks the robust faith that finds all satisfaction and joy in the fellowship of the invisible but indwelling Christ.

Here, then, is our indictment against pageantry. It was copied by an apostate church from the heathen. It has always flourished in the time of the churches lowest spiritual state. It is the strong grip of Rome, with her images, crucifixes and pageantry to hold her superstitious devotees. When adopted by any church it has the tendency to dissipate the spiritual devotion of those who spend their time in preparation for the show. It creates pride and waste in the brilliant and varied costumes necessary to make it interesting and spectacular. And the impression made is wholly superficial and sentimental—not permanently affecting the character for good. It is an enemy to New Testament and Apostolic Christianity and experience. It is amusing, entertaining, recreational and spiritually dissipating, rather than devout, worshipful and purifying. But the church and people that neglects and rejects the Holy Ghost and the vital and satisfying experience which he brings are compelled to hide their barrenness and desolation by adopting such things. To such this article may not be appealing or convincing; but from those who believe in the old-time faith and devotion to God, we expect a hearty Amen.