

Headless Chicken

A Reflection on the Governance of the Church

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Jeremiah 18:1-6

Perhaps I should have said 'shepherdless sheep'. I remember an illustration given by an American Bible teacher about the state of Christians without Christ at the helm of their lives. It seems that, decades ago, American housewives used a curious method to slaughter a number of chickens together. They would hang the chicken by the neck on a rope in their back yard and, in one sweep, sever the head. The headless chicken would fall and run around aimlessly before it died. The Diocese of Delhi, Church of North India, has become like a headless chicken. The Church of North India itself is in no better shape. We will run around — but for how long?

The attempt to ordain a bishop for the diocese, we hear, was thwarted because of one person's absence from the collegium that decides on the next bishop. While the Church of North India's constitution is blatantly violated most of the time, here was one occasion on which one hundred per cent compliance was insisted upon. It is nothing but a display of hypocrisy of the highest order. The entire process was not without a pinch of amusement: just before the date of the election, one of the prospective bishops crossed over to a breakaway group. We seem to be united in Christ, but divided in faith.

Ritually, the Church of North India celebrated the Reformation, to commemorate the reformation movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in the month of October this year too. This reminds me of the analogy of the fishing club whose members never cast a line into the water. Sunday after Sunday, we simply gloat over the great sacrifices of the apostles and martyrs who built the Church. We need more than a reformation if matters are to be set right. We have to go back to the drawing board and build upward; we need to step back to AD 1. This task cannot be outsourced to the clergy, but has to be taken in hand by the laity — those who would not, without exception, take on any position in a re-built Church of North India.

Those who swear by the Church of North India's constitution must know that it is not sacrosanct, like the Gospels; it is only a convenient reference for orderly conduct. It is therefore time for us to revisit the constitution, beginning with the election to various positions, such as those of moderators and bishops. Why should we have a bishop whom we have not elected? The parishes and the congregation should elect the bishop for a diocese, perhaps on the model of the American presidential election. It is high time we refused to accept a bishop whom we do not know, and who may in due course turn out to be a rotten egg. The time for lamentation is over; now is the time to pull up our socks and confront the situation directly. The clergy should be relieved of all administrative and financial functions. We have many specialists in our Christian community who can deal with these matters, definitely much more effectively, efficiently and honestly. The clergy should devote their time and energies to ministering to the spiritual

needs of the community. Reformation should begin with this fundamental and profound change. No patchwork will last.

In conclusion, I should like to quote from Jeremiah's account of his visit to the potter's house:

"The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." (Jeremiah 18:1–6)

We, as members of the Church of North India, should act like the potter: feel around the Church to find the impurities that mar the organisation, break it down to its elements, and reshape it. Such an action, I would say, would carry Divine sanction, as God demonstrated to Jeremiah. Jesus works through His faithful. It is time to rise and rebuild.