

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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THE ROAD TO ROME

With the death of Paul VI, in the recent past, the world was once again treated to the spectacle of the burial and replacement of a pope. And what a spectacle it was! As we watched the televised pomp and pageantry of what was billed as a "simple funeral service," we found it difficult to conceive that all of this was supposed to be in fulfillment of the will of One who said: "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your teacher, and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father on earth: for one is your Father, even he who is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your master, even the Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled: and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted." (Matt. 23:8-12.)

Equally difficult to conceive is the thought that this elaborate and wealthy organization can trace its origins to the simple New Testament church established on Pentecost. This is not to say that it is the same church - its identity was lost centuries ago - but herein is a lesson for us. If the church of the first century could so change as to lose its identity, so can the church of the 20th century. It is important, therefore, that we analyze the changes that produced this sad digression.

THE STEPS OF APOSTASY

1. The Steps Were Small. The Roman Catholic Church did not become what it is overnight. Indeed, it has taken nearly twenty centuries. Each step taken has been so small as to be almost imperceptible. Few have been so revolutionary as to be particularly disturbing. Surely no one could have envisioned the eventual destiny to which these small steps would lead.

2. The Steps Were Logical. They appealed to human wisdom and appeared to be improvements. Even more significantly, each seemed to be required (or at least justified) by the preceding one. The first involved elevation of one of the elders to be a kind of

permanent president or overseer (bishop). Next, smaller churches in nearby communities who did not have such an able leader came to depend on the bishop in the city. Soon the bishops of the smaller cities were looking to those of the larger cities for leadership, and in turn these began to gather on occasions for discussion of various problems. Each step seemed altogether reasonable and productive of greater efficiency.

3. The Steps Were Successful - Successful at least in the eyes of men. As organization increased, the church became more "visible" and more influential. By 313 A. D. the mighty Roman Empire ceased to persecute and began to listen to the church. With this new recognition came large numbers of converts and acquisition of large and impressive buildings. Success indeed! AND WHO CAN ARGUE WITH SUCCESS?

4. The Steps Were Always an Enhancement of Human Vanity. The primitive church offered unlimited opportunity for service, but none for worldly honor. Even the apostles said of themselves: "For, I think, God hath set forth us the apostles last of all, as men doomed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, both to angels and men. We are fools for Christ's sake ... we are weak, ... we have dishonor." (1 Corinthians 4:9-10.)

All of the glory and honor which the church had to give was for the Lord. When the Corinthian church began to exalt men they were sternly rebuked by Paul. (1 Corinthians 1-4.) Later John the apostle wrote reproving "Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence." (3 John 9.) With removal of the apostles' influence, however, the leaven worked more effectively, culminating in the revelation of "the man of sin ... so that he sitteth in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God." (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4.)

5. The Steps Were Away from Divine Authority. As men were elevated in the church, they exercised increasing authority over the faith of the members. Soon they were making creeds and anathematizing all who disagreed. These creeds which were, at first, an effort to expound Scripture gradually became statements of doctrine far beyond anything hinted at in Scripture. Tradition was eventually recognized as equal in authority with the Bible.

6. The Steps Were Predicted. Paul warned the elders of the church in Ephesus: "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20:29-30.) Similar warnings and predictions are found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; 2 Peter 2:1-3 and elsewhere.

LESSONS FOR US

It has often been observed that the primary thing we learn from history is that men do not learn from history. But this does not have to be true of us personally. Surely we must be warned. Surely we must learn from the facts observed from the past.

The predictions of apostasy are as relevant today as in New Testament times. Every preceding generation has experienced apostasy. There is no reason to suppose that ours is to be the exception. Indeed, the radical changes taking place in society all about us make us all the more likely to be drawn away from "the old paths." Every new proposal, every new doctrine must be studied in the light of God's word. We must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by charges of "legalism" and "book religion." The New Testament in its entirety is the doctrine of Christ. "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." (2 John 9.)

We should be especially suspicious of projects and plans that would tend to exalt any man or group of men to a position of prominence among their brethren. Regardless of their piety and Bible knowledge, those who stand to gain prominence by some scheme that is being promoted can scarcely be expected to be entirely objective in evaluating the scripturalness of it.

The apparent success of a project or method does not prove that it is scriptural. Moses obtained water from the rock, but God was displeased with his manner of doing it. Nor does the apparent logic of an undertaking prove that it is right. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death." (Proverbs 14:12.) And to argue that a departure is "such a small step" is to close our eyes to the lesson taught by every departure of the past, all of which have been the result of a succession of small steps. A step may be ever so small; but if it is a step away from the truth, or away from God's plan, it is a step that must not be taken!

Truly, "Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." Or, to quote Scripture: "Behold, how much wood is kindled by how small a fire!" (James 3:5.) Let us be wise to learn the lessons that history can teach.

- Sewell Hall, via *The Graphic Evangelist*, Vol. 23, No.2, January 23, 1983.

Do Our Children Fit In?

What are parents accomplishing when they provide things for their children, toys, shoes, jeans, backpacks and phones that have the same brand or look as the majority of other children? Not in every case, but in many, it is because parents want their children to be popular, to be liked, and to fit in. They do not want their children to be singled out as different. They might be picked on or bullied. Doesn't that happen where there are significant groups of children? Some children are waiting in the wings to spot someone else that is different in looks or actions or size. Then they are all too ready to boost their own perception of themselves by downing others. Parents have already been around the block and want to prevent their children from being recipients of bad behavior. We do not want to be different from the world, and we do not want our children to be different either. Maybe unknowingly we teach them that it is important to conform and be liked by everyone else.

Does this way of thinking remind you at all of what happened among the people of God when they thought this way? Do you recall the days when Israel became content to reject God as their King, requesting that Samuel appoint a king over them for this reason: "that we also may be like all the nations"? The previous warnings from Moses and Joshua regarding the results of this action fell on deaf ears. They had failed to "utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you," (Deuteronomy 20:17). The reason for the Lord's command? Note: "so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 20:18). This is exactly what happened to them for wanting to be like the world. They did all their detestable things. Israel started this downward spiral because they did not want to be different from the world. Do we?

The influence to conform is very powerful. It is not surprising that we find the desire to be popular and liked by the world within the body of Christ. We may have been raised this way or we may have developed this desire on our own, but in any case we must take action against this drive. "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2). The ways and practices that we should be patterning ourselves after are those of Jesus Christ. We must not drift into the prevailing customs of our world. The word of God must be the guide for parents and children in speech and action. We should not be saying what we say or doing what we do or possessing what we possess because it makes us like the world. "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior;" (1 Peter 1:14-15).

Being transformed by the renewing of the mind is a radical change in thinking and behavior for the Christian.

Paul raised the question, “what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Corinthians 6:15b). What is the answer to that question if we want our children to look like the world so they will be popular and accepted? Christians are admonished, “Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,’ says the Lord. ‘AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ Says the Lord Almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18). Christians have little in common with the world. The Lord warned disciples, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you,” (Luke 6:26; cf. John 15:19).

What are we teaching our children about conforming to the world around them and about being popular? Are we showing them and teaching them that Christians are different? May the Lord grant us the strength and courage to stand with him in all of life!

- Gary Smalley

- * “He who lives content with little possesses everything!”
 - * “If your trouble is deep-seated and of long-standing, try kneeling!”
 - * “Our strength is shown in the things we stand for; our weakness is shown in the things we fall for!”
 - * “Grant that the heat in my heart may melt the lead in my feet!”
 - * “It is often surprising what heights can be attained just by being on the level!”
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THIS WEEK'S LESSON: The sermon for Sunday morning is: *The Stumbling Block of the Cross!* (Text: Galatians 5:11).

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

HEAR THE GOSPEL

(Romans 10:14-17; John 20:30-31; Romans 1:15-17)

BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

(Acts 8:37; John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6)

REPENT OF PAST SINS
(Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)

CONFESS CHRIST
(Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

BE BAPTIZED
(Romans 6:3-4; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36-39; 1 Peter 3:21)

LIVE A FAITHFUL LIFE
(Revelation 2:10; 2 Peter 1:5-11; John 15:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25)