

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 the 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 the 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." (Matthew 23:8-12, KJV).

Equally difficult to conceive is the thought that his 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 AD 313, 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 the 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" (cf. Jeremiah 6:16).

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, emphasis SH). 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.

* Editor's Note: This article was published in 1982. When it was written, the Roman Catholic pope Paul VI had died in 1978 and was soon replaced by John Paul II, who led the denomination from 1978 until his death in 2005. Although this study is now several years old, it addresses principles important for every generation to remember.

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

Regarding Ears and Hearts

The Lord Jesus made use of a very effective means of teaching spiritual truth to His listeners: parables (from a word meaning, "to cast alongside"). The Christ wanted men to see God's truth for themselves, so He made *comparisons*. These earthly stories with heavenly meanings concerned relationships, things and processes with which they were well acquainted in order to increase understanding and memory of heaven's truth. What a Master Teacher!

The Lord's disciples asked Him an interesting question with regard to those listening: "Why do You speak to them in parables?" (Matthew 13:10). His answer remains thought-provoking: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." (verse 11; His answer extends through verse 17). Many foolish claims have been made regarding what the Lord meant by a knowledge given to some but denied to others. One fails in fundamental knowledge of the Scriptures when he blames the Lord for unbelief among men, enlightening some who are chosen and dulling the minds of others! (Would this be showing partiality? "God is not one to show partiality," Acts 10:34.)

The parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-9; cf. Luke 8:4-8) answers the question of how knowledge of truth is given to some but not others (Matthew 13:18-23; cf. Luke 8:11-15). The "gate-keeper" is actually the one who has ears to hear (willing and heeding, cf. John 1:11-12) or the one who refuses to hear (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Any who allow the influences characteristic of this world (the evil one, affliction or persecution because of the word, the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth) to prevent "the word of the kingdom" from residing in the heart and working to produce spiritual fruit are left without the knowledge. It is entirely a matter of willingness to hear and heed. Luke declares the condition of the ones who are blessed by the knowledge of the truth: "these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance." (Luke 8:15). These have an honest disposition regarding the truth, they are candid and earnest, diligently receiving and keeping it. They bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). The word of God has gone beyond a mere surface penetration; it has been allowed a deeper infiltration, thus producing faith and obedience.

Have you allowed the word of God a place in your heart to live and produce good results?

- Gary Smalley

- * "The person who is always finding fault seldom finds anything else!"
 - * "The dictionary is the only place where you will find SUCCESS before WORK!"
 - * "Many 'mega' churches don't seem to be 'mega' when it comes to doctrine!"
 - * "A Christian is one who does not have to consult his bankbook to see the extent of his *real* wealth!"
 - * "The measure of a man's real character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out!"
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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)