

IS CHRISTIANITY CHANGING?

IT IS OBVIOUS THAT SOMETHING IS CHANGING!

Christ began one church. (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23, 4:3; Col. 1:18). He prayed that all of His followers be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:21). But it did not work out that way (1 Cor. 1:10-13, 3:1-4). He knew it wouldn't (Luke 18:8). The Apostles warn of a falling away (1 Tim. 4:1-6, 2 Tim. 4:3-4, 2 Pet. 2:1-3, Acts 20:29-30).

Paul warned the Elders of the church in Ephesus that of their own numbers men would rise up and lead disciples of Christ away from the truth (Acts 20:29-30). It appears a very early departure (if not the earliest significant one!) had to do with changing the organization of the church. ,So long as the organization remained intact, there was a guard against apostasy. In about 110 AD Ignatius of Antioch was arrested for being a Christian and sentenced to martyrdom in Rome. As he was making his way to Rome, he wrote seven letters. Six were to churches (Ephesus, Magnesia, Philadelphia, Rome, Smyrna, Tralles) and one to Polycarp of Smyrna. Ignatius letters show that by this early date, church polity had already changed from a plurality of bishops in a local church (Phil. 1:1....also called elders and pastors or shepherds....Acts 20:17-28, 1 Peter 5:1-4), to a situation where there was only one man with the title of bishop, while the elders and deacons were subject to him (i.e. an Episcopal Monarch). It is only a short time later that these bishops increased their authority as other smaller churches in their area also became subject to them and the diocesan concept develops. Note the following portions of Ignatius' letters: "Take care to partake of one Eucharist...just as there is one bishop assisted by the presbytery (elders) and the deacons..." (Smyrna 7:1). "I exhort you to strive to do all things in harmony with God: the bishop is to preside in the place of God, while the presbyters (elders) are to function as the counsel of the Apostles, and the deacons, who are most dear to me, are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ" (Magnesia 6:1). "Hence it is proper for you to act in agreement with the mind of the bishop, and this you do. Certain it is that your presbytery (body of elders), which is a credit to its name, is a credit to God; for it harmonizes with the bishop as completely as the strings with a harp" (Ephesus 4). Could Paul's prophecy in Acts 20:29-30 have been describing this change in church governance which eventually opens the door to the naming of a new chief bishop, the pope? Observe how much authority is already invested in a bishop by the year 110 AD! "It is not permitted without authorization from the bishop either to baptize or to hold an agape" (Smyrna 8:2). "For

those of both sexes who contemplate marriage it is proper to enter the union with the sanction of the bishop; thus their marriage will be acceptable to the Lord and not just gratify lust" (Polycarp 5:2).

From this beginning of division, churches have escalated in number until today we have many hundreds, with specific denominations further broken down into many subgroups.

The course of church history has been likened to a great stream that gradually has become very contaminated, filled with debris. This pollution represents religious divisions caused by introduction of doctrines which do not originate in the New Testament, and by the denial of many New Testament truths. This divided state of Christendom has caused many to just give up their religious search. Their attitude seems to be, "if you religious experts can't agree as to what truth is, how can a simple layman know what to choose?" As a result some, although thirsty, decide not to drink from this polluted stream. Others thank God for diversity and drink from the polluted stream. Is there not a better solution?

In the following statements, an effort will be made to trace the course of events that has led to our present fragmented religious state.

Satan is opposed to the Church!!! He tried to keep it from happening (Matt. 4:1-11). When he couldn't cause Christ to fail, he killed Him. When he could not stop the resurrection of Christ, he attacked the Church with great fury (Rev. 12:1-17).

Satan often works in small increments rather than in large leaps. The first Psalm is a case in point, "How blessed is the man who does not WALK in the counsel of the wicked, nor STAND in the path of sinners, nor SIT in the seat of scoffers" (Psl. 1:1). Notice the apparent progression from walking, to standing, to sitting in relation to evil. It is said that a frog in a kettle of water does not notice the increase in temperature which gradually cooks him. I see four steps that have occurred over the course of history, as Satan has worked to thwart the Church.

First, there is the entry of paganism into Christianity...especially after Constantine. Even in New Testament times there are indications of Jewish, Gnostic and other infiltrations into Christianity (See Colossians). After Constantine, an organizational structure very much like that of the Roman Empire is assumed, and Greco-Roman religious themes become part of the church. For example, the Greco-Roman gods seem to find their counterpart in the Saints who assume the protective roles once

ascribed to these ancient false deities. As the Waldensian scholar Ernesto Comba wrote in his monumental work, "Cristianesimo e Cattolicesimo Romano," "It was during the 4th century, as a result of the mass entry of pagan populations into the Church, that the cult of the Saints received its first great impulse... what happened then is what unfortunately happens today, the doctrine in the Roman Church, gave way, adapting itself, deviating into popular superstitious practices...(Editrice Claudiana, Torre Pellice, 1951, pp. 320-321 — translated by Carl Mitchell).

Next we arrive at the historical struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism. The efforts of Zwingli, Luther and Calvin to purify the church from within, succeeded in the expulsion of their movements from the Catholic Church, and formation of many new churches. Lines of doctrinal battle were drawn, resulting in bitter controversy and often culminating in physical warfare (this finally came to an end with the signing of the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 when Lutherans and Calvinists gained equal recognition with Catholics). However, the official Catholic view was that Protestants were to be considered heretics, and there was NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CATHOLIC CHURCH! The result was the frequent persecution of heretics, the revival of the inquisition, and various efforts (resulting from the Catholic Counter-Reformation) to stop the advance of Protestantism. This continued until recent times, as illustrated by the harassment, closure of buildings, arrest and expulsion of missionaries, and other negative actions directed at churches of Christ in Italy in the 1950's.

Then comes JOHN the 23rd the 2nd (a former John the 23rd, later declared an "anti-pope", lived in the late 1400's and is buried in the Baptistry of St. John in Florence, Italy) and the opening of Vatican II. At this point we hear that we are not heretics, but separated brethren. Christianity is a MOSAIC, it is declared, and different beliefs are to be respected. And so we see ushered in the ecumenical movement. Many joint meetings occurred between Protestant and Catholic leaders, after which they all went back to their own practices and their own churches.

This brings us to the most recent development, PLURALISM. Many leaders of Protestantism and even Catholicism are saying we are brothers as well of all the other world religions. It is not right to hold that God has spoken with just one voice through one person, they say. John Hick, in GOD HAS MANY NAMES has written:

"The basic hypothesis which suggests itself is that the different streams of religious experience represent diverse awareness of the same transcendent reality, which is perceived in characteristically different ways by different human mentalities, formed by and

forming different cultural histories. . . One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances." (Westminster, 1982, pp. 88, 11)

This of course sounds like music in the ears of our religious neighbors (with few exceptions), who have said all along that one religion is as good as another. Hindu Swami Vivekananda said:

"I am proud to belong to a religion that has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true...The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, or a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the others and yet preserve its individuality, and grow according to its own Law of growth." (Netland, Harold A. DISSONANT VOICES, Eerdmans 1991, p. 16).

The American Catholic scholar, Paul Ritter, has also said that in his opinion, the majority of Catholic theologians have understood a part of Vatican II to mean that salvation may be enjoyed as well in the non-Christian faiths (Netland, p. 25). I think there are some in our fellowship who hold to this theory as well! Of course, Christ still says that He is the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except by Him (John 14:6)...that it is the thief and robber who tries to enter the sheepfold without going through the door (John 10:1,7)... that the unbelieving Jews could not go where He was going but would rather die in their sins (John 8:19-24). Peter still says there is salvation in no other name (Acts 4:12). John also writes that salvation is for those who are in Jesus: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life, he who does not have the Son does not have the life...we know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." (1 John 5:11-12, 19).

Paul also reminds the Ephesians of the time when they were without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12). Some attempt to relate the comments in Romans chapters 2 and 3 to our contemporary world. However, the context has to do with Gentiles of the Old Testament period WHO WERE NOT UNDER the Law of Moses. For that reason, they were to be judged by their own consciences. The New Testament has placed all of mankind under the universal Gospel of Christ which was to be preached to all people (Matt. 28:18-20). However, even in that limited context (the pre-Christian world), both Jew and Gentile had failed under their laws, and had not achieved the "glory of God" (3:23).

It was in this setting, that a righteousness apart from Law was given (Rom. 3:21-22), that is the righteousness comes through the offering of Christ. Only in this manner did God find a way to be both JUST (consistent with the demands of law) and JUSTIFYING (offer forgiveness through grace to the guilty) (Rom. 3:26).

Pluralism denies the force of these passages, saying the Bible is not propositional truth (i.e. truth is not contained in the literal statement, but rather in the essence that underlies it...much as in a parable), but myth (not in the sense of fantasy, but rather a statement not to be taken literally). For example, it is claimed the resurrection of Christ does not really mean Christ was raised from the dead, but rather that His teaching continues on and flourishes in the lives of believers.

But, we see other negative consequences beyond this denial of the uniqueness of Christ. If the Bible is not trustworthy in its statements about Christ, then we must conclude that we have no universal ethic, no divinely given standard of morality. In fact, this is the position of the majority in the U.S. today. An article in MINISTRY CURRENTS, Jan-Mar 1994, Vol. 4, No. 1, p.1—3, entitled "Twelve signs of American's spiritual vitality," states that while 95% believe in some form of God, 3 out of 4 do not believe that there is such a thing as absolute moral truth. So, in our time we hear again, VOX POPOLO VOX DEI...AND ONCE MORE, MAN HAS COME TO THE CENTER, DISPLACING GOD." It has been rightly said, "The fruit of the tree was self." The ultimate idolatry consists in making God in our own image (Psl. 50:21, Isa. 55:8-9, Rom. 11:34).

So we cannot say there is such a thing as sin! It is not politically correct today to say, "do not commit adultery", "do not have an abortion", "do not lie", "do not get drunk", "do not follow a homosexual life-style." In fact, to say something is a sin, or even to quote the Bible, can relegate one to the far right. Recently a judge in Louisiana forbade the local school district to teach abstinence, as that amounted to teaching religion in the schools! WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SIN? is a book by Karl Menninger of the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, KA. In this book he deplored the fact that the word "sin" is being dropped from our vocabulary. In the meantime, the New Testament still says mankind will eventually be judged by Christ's words, and that those not written in His book of life will be doomed (John 12:48;, Rev. 20:15, 21:27).

Gradually we see the law permitting almost everything: abortion, divorce, sexual deviancy. We see a general decline of morality, spurred by violence & sex on TV...war increasingly, children brutalized by their parents, home failure, danger in the streets and a general loss of respect for public officials and for law

An article in "Emerging Trends", Nov. 1993, entitled DO THEY HAVE GOOD MORAL PRINCIPLES polled U.S. citizens as to how they rated various professionals in terms of morals and ethics. The following percentages rated each category as either "ethical" or "very ethical": pharmacists (67%), professors (57%), engineers (54%) medicals doctors (53%), ministers (52%), police (51%), dentists (49%), bankers (29%), journalists (24%), businessmen (22%), senators (18%), TV people (18%), lawyers (17%), congressmen (14%), insurance salesmen (10%), and car salesmen (6%)

There occurs every 24 hours in the U.S.: 65 murders (3rd cause of death among school children in elementary and middle school...Wash. Post Weekly, Feb. 28, 1994), 299 rapes, 2088 physical assaults, 4413 cars stolen, 8164 thefts (U.S. News & World Report, Nov. 15, 1993).

And not withstanding our depleted moral state, in the U.S. 78% believe there is a heaven, and 77% believe they will go there. Less than 50% believe in hell and only 4% believe they may go there.

Some schools that did have a religious anchor, have cast it off. For example, the Harvard seal, recently changed, previously had: VERITAS CRISTO ET ECCLESIAE (truth for Christ and the Church), three books with the outside two open face up (representing the Old and New Testaments), and the center book (representing human reason) open and face down, and the words of John 8:31-32, "If you abide in my words, you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free". The new seal has only VERITAS and the three books, all open and face up.

Shall we drink from the muddy river? In addition to the choices of either drinking the polluted water, or refusing to drink at all...there remains the option of tracing the river to its source, and there where the pristine water flows out of the rock of the mountain, drinking unpolluted water to ones fill. This is of course the challenge God directed to wayward Israel through his servant Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord, Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you shall find rest for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:16).

But Israel answered, "We will not walk in it!" Let us hope the answer in our age will be better!

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