WHO MUDDIED THE WATER?

The stream of Christianity was clear and pure at its beginning. It was like a beautiful stream coming out of the rock of the mountain. However, it did not remain such for very long. Christ began one church (Matthew 16:18). He prayed that His followers be one as He and the Father are one (John 17:20-21). Sadly, division came very soon (1 Cor. 1:10-13). The Apostles warned of an even more flagrant falling away in the future (2 Tim. 4:3-4, 2 Peter 2:1-3). **Paul** warned the Elders of the church in Ephesus that of their own number men would rise up and lead disciples away from the truth (Acts 21:29-30). In this admonition, Paul clearly states that departure from the original truths would be spearheaded by men within the leadership of the local church. It is truly amazing how quickly this occurred!

In about 110 A.D., Ignatius of Antioch was arrested for being a Christian and sentenced to b martyred in Rome. As he made his way toward Rome, he wrote seven letters: six were to churches (Ephesus, Magnesia, Philadelphia, Rome, Smyrna, Tralles), and one was to Polycarp of Smyrna. By this time we see a change in church organization from a plurality of bishops (also called elders or pastors....see Phil. 1:1, Acts 20:17,28) who shared responsibility equally in a local church, to a "one man rule" situation (i.e., an Episcopal Monarch). It is clear from Ignatius' writing that within a little more than 50 years of Paul's warning, in many churches, a strong elder had gained ascendancy over the other elders. Now, he alone wore the title of bishop while the others were called elders, and were encouraged to be obedient to their bishop. **Note** the following excerpts from 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:l). "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 (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). It is interesting that only in his letter to Rome does he not use such language indicating that Rome was late in adapting to such an unbiblical organizational change!

When you think about it, it is obvious that the changing from a plurality of leaders to a "one man" leadership would be a logical place for Satan to attack the church. So long as the original organizational plan was intact, a plurality of leaders furnished a safeguard against apostasy. Once there would be an Episcopal Monarch, there would be no one who could keep him from leading the church wherever he chose. In fact, we see in Ignatius' letters that the process of consolidating power in one man was already taking place. "***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).

It was only a matter of time until this local bishop had extended his authority over other smaller churches in his area, and the diocesan concept was born. This gives way later to the struggle between the two largest and strongest dioceses(Rome and Constantinople) which of course was never resolved, and culminated in the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox denominations. From this beginning of division, churches have escalated in number until today there are hundreds, with specific denominations often further broken down into many sub-groups.

Is there hope that the prayer of Christ for unity will ever be answered? The answer is "Yes" and "No". It is "Yes" if believers are willing to follow the stream of church history (now terribly tainted), to its Biblical source to discover the pure water at the origin of the life-giving fount opened by Christ. It will continue to be "No" if we take at face value what churches are saying today, given the erosion from the Bible's vision of the church presented by Christ and the Apostles. The restoration plea is still valid! Jeremiah put it this way, "Thus says the Lord, stand in 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'' (6:16). No doubt that just as it was in Jeremiah's day, many will refuse this request, but those who accept it will be united with all the saved in the one body for which Christ prayed (John 17:20-21, Matt. 7:7-8, Eph. 4:1-6).

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