

THE APOSTASY AND THE KINGDOM

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SCRIPTURE: Acts 20, verses 28-32.

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified

There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them ... And many shall follow their pernicious ways.

Whenever men who have known God and covenanted to serve him turn from their vows, transgress his laws, and change his ordinances, they break the covenant which they have made with God, and God is no longer bound. This constitutes apostasy.

Ancient Israel, as we have seen in previous sermons several times changed the ordinances of God, rebelled against his government, and broke the covenant which he had made with them in Horeb. God made many attempts to bring them back, to persuade them to remember their covenant. Every Old Testament prophet warned Israel against apostasy, and tried to reclaim the people for Jehovah; but because of the rebellion and sin of the people God eventually had to cast them off, and turn for a time to the Gentiles.

Almost every New Testament prophet, and even Jesus himself, also warned of apostasy and its consequences, and foretold the apostasy of the church. Jesus warned that the net would gather of all kinds; that tares would be sown among the wheat; that after his departure many should walk in darkness. Paul warned the church at Ephesus that grievous wolves should assail them from without, and that perverse men should corrupt them from within. Paul warned the Thessalonians that there should be a falling away from the faith before Christ's second coming; he wrote to Timothy that there would come a time when men would not endure sound doctrine, when evil men and seducers should wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived; when some should depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, speaking lies in hypocrisy, forbidding marriage, and commanding to abstain from meats. Peter prophesied that there would be false prophets and false teachers among the people of the church who should bring in abominable heresies, and that many should follow the pernicious ways of those who would make merchandise of the saints. Jude warned of certain men who had crept in and turned the grace of God into lasciviousness. John, who was the last to write New Testament scripture, asserted that in his time the spirit of AntiChrist was already in the world, and in his vision on Patmos saw that there was power given to the beast which rose out of the sea to make war with the saints, and to overcome them.

Practically all historians are agreed that serious abuses crept into the early Christian church. But there are two schools of thought as to the results of these abuses. One school of thought maintains that right or wrong, the church was still the church; that it could not fail, because Jesus had promised that the gates of hell should not prevail against it. The opposing school of thought maintains that when the Church of Christ transgressed the laws of Christ and changed the ordinances, the covenant between Christ and the church was broken, and the apostate church no longer had Christ's authority on earth. Christ's guarantee that the gates of hell should not prevail against his church was no guarantee of perpetuity in spite of apostasy.

The imagery of John's vision in the Book of Revelation points unmistakably to an apostasy. In the 12th chapter of Revelation we meet a woman -- Christ's bride, the church -- clothed with the sun of Christ's authority, with the moon of the Mosaic law and the Aaronic priesthood under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. This woman was ready to be delivered of a man-child -- the Kingdom of God -- who should rule all nations with a rod of iron, which is the law or the word of his mouth. But even before the kingdom was fully developed within the church, a great red dragon stood waiting to devour it as soon as it was delivered. The child was delivered, and immediately caught up to God where the dragon could not harm it; and the woman -- the church -- fled into the wilderness, away from the evil dragon and all the haunts of men, where she was to remain for a thousand, two hundred, and threescore days, or 1260 prophetic years. The kingdom was again lost to earth; the church fled into the wilderness. The dragon made war with the remnant of her seed, or with the saints, and overcame them. The apostasy was complete. The kingdom had again suffered violence, and the violent had taken it by force.

What were the signs of apostasy, and how did it come about? In the light of what we have been studying about the kingdom of God, it seems safe to say in general that the church began to go into apostasy when it lost the true kingdom concept. As in ancient Israel, the apostasy consisted in a forsaking of the kingdom ideal for a kingdom of worldly pomp and power and motivation. With the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the state religion; the offices of the church began to come under the control of the political government. Offices were openly bought and sold, and officers appointed through political expediency, instead of by divine direction and revelation as in the days when the Spirit said, "Separate unto me Barnabas and Saul."

The church's officers began to emulate the political officers of the empire, and to exercise worldly power, to use force and compulsion and military conquest not only to enforce obedience within the church, but to compel acceptance of the church by those without. The officers of the church took on the trappings of royalty and aristocracy, and demanded preferment and prestige, and immunity from civil laws and taxes. The rulers of the church demanded the right to make or break kings, and to rule over kings as representatives of God in political, as well as in religious affairs. The church which had once been a theocracy -- a government of God through revelation to his servants -- with constitutional democratic controls and safeguards over the religious rights and liberties of each individual member, became an absolute monarchy in which the rights and liberties of men were swallowed up and destroyed, and respect for the dignity and personality of men sank to an all-time low.

In this apostate church, revelation ceased. Wicked rebellious men cannot hear the voice of God, and if they could, they would not heed. Because God could no longer speak to the church through his prophetic officers once set in the church, men began to rule in their own wisdom.

Into this apostate church unregenerate, unrepentant men flocked by the thousands, sometimes at the point of the sword, sometimes seeking the prestige and social approval which membership in the popular, politically powerful state church would bring. To keep all these unregenerate pagans happy and satisfied the church partially or wholly adopted certain heretical heathen philosophies; it changed simple, spiritually meaningful ordinances into magical formulas; it took pagan festivals and made them church holidays; it took pagan gods and pagan heroes and with suitable rites transformed them into Christian saints.

Again both God and man had to wait for the coming of Christ's kingdom -- for the day when his will would be done on earth as in heaven. God had not abdicated the throne. He had not given up the kingdom idea. As always, he was only granting men their agency, and rewarding them with the results of their own doing, knowing that soon or late they would be constrained to acknowledge him as their God and their King.