

The Changing Church

Introduction. Some of the saddest words in all the Bible are found in Judges 2:6-10. These are the words of apostasy. Sadly, this was only the third generation from Joshua (cp. Deuteronomy 6:10-15). The fundamental problem with Israel was that they lost sight of their distinctiveness as the people of God. They did so because of their failure to remember what set them apart from the world.

It is possible for the church to evolve away from what God intended. Evolution is nothing more than a gradual process by which something changes into a different and more complex form. The apostle Paul warned many times that a gradual apostasy is possible (Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-5). You know that if apostasy happened once (and it did), it can happen again (and it has).

I. The Difference Between The Lord's Church And Denominations

A. The Lord's church and denominations differ in at least four areas.

1. They differ in their nature.
 - a) The Lord's church contains only those who are saved by God's direction (Acts 2:47). It contains those who have been "called out" of the world and of sin (2 Thessalonians 2:14). It is exclusive in its nature.
 - b) Denominations see themselves as one part of the great whole of God's people. They accept into their fellowship those who have been "saved" by methods of human wisdom. They are inclusive in their nature.
2. They differ in their standard.
 - a) The Lord's church uses only the Bible (Colossians 3:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 4:11).
 - b) You may have expected to see "creeds" here. However, denominations use culture as their standard. They change constantly to fit the world and remain attractive to the crowd. In fact, some men in the ultra liberal churches of Christ openly declare themselves "change agents."
3. They differ in their function.
 - a) The Lord's church has a spiritual function (John 6:63; 1 Timothy 3:15). Its mission is to save souls (Luke 19:10).
 - b) Denominations have a social function. They cater to the outer man with daycare centers, hospitals, benevolent programs, entertainment, recreation, and lectures on finances and health, divorce recovery, and weight loss.
4. They differ in their government.
 - a) The Lord's church has Christ as its sole head with complete authority (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). Elders shepherd and feed, but they do not make law and policy.
 - b) Denominations have people as their head. They are controlled by councils, conventions, boards, and synods.

B. When these distinctions are blurred, the Lord's church becomes a denomination just like all the ones in the religious world.

II. The Four Stages Of Apostasy

A. Hebrews 2:1 suggests that apostasy happens in a very gradual manner. Sudden changes are too noticeable. In any apostasy, there are four stages which occur.

1. Change the thinking of the people through preaching.
 - a) This does not necessarily mean that lessons are full of “fluff.” Preachers can simply refuse to preach all of the truth. Hard sermons may be preached on topics that everyone agrees on, such as abortion, but nothing else said.
 - b) There may be plenty of lessons on first principles, the home, and living a Christian life, but lessons on authority, false doctrines, and current trends are no longer preached. This will change the people because it will change the heart (Matthew 15:19).
 2. Talk about new ideas that are meant to place doubt.
 - a) Questions can be asked such as, “What would be wrong with ... ?” or “Do you think our arguments against ... were good arguments?”
 - b) These questions are simply meant to raise doubt in the minds of the members. It does not matter if I am wrong or right, I am just trying to put doubt in your mind. Too much preaching today raises questions rather than answers questions.
 3. Slowly introduce questionable practices that lead to apostasy.
 - a) This may start with practices that you just cannot quite put your finger on what is wrong with them.
 - b) Anyone who questions these practices will immediately be labeled as a “brotherhood watchdog” or be accused of “trying to run the brotherhood”.
 4. Introduce the full-blown innovation.
 - a) There is a zero percent chance that this congregation will have a choir within the next year, but you get a preacher who is willing to carry the congregation through these stages and in 30 years, you will have a choir.
 - b) Earl West’s *The Search For The Ancient Order* traces the development of and split over instrumental music in the 1840s and it followed this exact pattern.
- B. It only takes one generation to make a change and another generation to admit the change and take it further (Jeremiah 6:16).

III. Signs Of Change Among Us

A. Churches are not immune to this process. Regrettably, there are signs of change among the Lord’s body.

1. Softer and more positive approaches to preaching.
 - a) More and more preaching is vague, says little, and uses virtually no scripture. It is not distinctive any longer, and can be heard in any denomination. We are being overloaded with sermons about prayer, developing your spiritual life, attitudes, discouragement, judging harshly, etc. There is nothing wrong with these lessons in and of themselves.
 - b) There has been more of a trend toward non-controversial and positive preaching which tolerates and accepts more and more in the world (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Unfortunately, we have become tolerant of so much

except the person who says, “I am right and you are wrong and here is why according to the Bible.”

- c) Many have embraced the “seeker-friendly” fad, and one of the claims made by these advocates is stressing the need for spiritual renewal without the negativity. The principle is preached, but the specific application of sin is seen as a turn-off.
 - d) Another sign of softness is changes in our terminology to more denominational terms such as “church camp” (Florida College), “prayer life,” “church home,” and “church family.” The Jews were speaking the language of Ashdod (Nehemiah 13:23-24). Using the language of Ashdod may very well mean that we are drifting toward Ashdod.
2. Loose views on worldliness.
- a) More churches are accepting social drinking and their young people are going to dances and the prom and nothing is ever said (Galatians 5:19; 1 Peter 4:3).
 - b) It seems as if the battle on immodest apparel has just been lost because Christians parade around in what could only be defined as nakedness according to the Bible (1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:3-4).
 - c) You may have never thought you would see the day, but some institutional churches are beginning to reconsider homosexuality.
3. Loose views on fellowship.
- a) Romans 14 is being used to allow false teachers fellowship in the Lord’s body on a variety of topics. The prevalent attitude is becoming, “Hands off me — let me teach what I want.”
 - b) We are strong on the doctrine of baptism and instrumental music, but fellowship is a doctrine too. It demands our attention and strength.
 - c) We should be longsuffering (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12), but unending fellowship with no rebuke is clearly not the gospel (Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15).
4. Promotion of the social gospel.
- a) We are seeing more churches advertise homecomings and 25 or 50 year celebrations for the congregation, as well as social events such as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, parties, and movie nights for the individual members in bulletins and church announcements.
 - b) We are seeing more lectureships and gospel meetings on the subjects of depression, loneliness, aging, and ministering to singles or to young people. These lectureships use a “gimmicky” approach to draw in visitors. A few congregations, after heeding such advice, have found out the hard way that people who visit because of gimmicks “stumble” at the “foolishness” of an unaltered gospel message (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).
 - c) More congregations are engaging in humming instead of singing during their worship service. Also, clapping is becoming more prominent after baptisms. Retreats are also being emphasized more in congregations in such a way as to gain more spirituality than with a local church.
 - d) Some Vacation Bible Schools are putting more emphasis on acting, drama, and playing than on learning lessons from the text of the Bible.

5. Increased role of women in the church.
 - a) Particularly among institutional churches we are starting to see women who preach, serve as deacons, lead singing, and waiting on the communion table. They are also being asked to declare testimonies, witness, and victories that they have accomplished spiritually.
 - b) More brethren are advocating women who speak freely in the worship service and who participate in making decisions in business meetings (1 Timothy 2:11-12).
 - c) Team teaching, where women are teaching younger age groups along with men, are blurring the lines of distinction of women's roles.
- B. Every apostasy began as something insignificant compared to what it became! One only has to look at the development of the Catholic church and institutionalism to see this.

Conclusion. Jesus has taught us what to do. We should know the word (John 8:32), be skilled in its use (2 Timothy 2:15), preach and teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), have no participation in unscriptural actions (Ephesians 5:11), and have no fellowship with error (2 John 9-11).

I love the Lord and His church with all my heart. I want brethren to be firm and shining lights to a dark world. But that means retaining our distinctiveness. The doctrine of Jesus Christ is a doctrine of distinction. It is a doctrine of separation from the world in order to follow God. God wants us to be different, and different we must be if we want to go to Heaven!