

of healing are exercised by physicians, surgeons, nurses, technicians, pharmacists, dietitians, and ministers, working together with each other and with God as a team to bring healing to the sick and afflicted of the church and of the community which the church serves.

23

What Became of Christ's Church?

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.—II Thessalonians 2:1-8.

IN previous chapters we have traced the development of Christ's church in which were set such officers as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers; a church which enjoyed the signs which Christ said should follow the believer, signs such as the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues, gifts of healings, and discerning of spirits. It was a church which had a sure knowledge and testimony that Jesus is the Christ. It was a church which was organized so that each officer and member was placed in proper functional relationship with all other officers and members, to

form the perfect body of Christ. It was a church of power, because it was a church of humility, obedience, and unswerving morality. It was a church of simplicity, with simple organization, sacraments, rites, and ceremonies.

WHAT BECAME OF THIS CHURCH?

There is a startling unanimity of opinion among church historians that before three centuries had passed, the church which still claimed to be the church of Christ bore slight resemblance to the original. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine lifted Christianity from the status of a persecuted or tolerated religion to the status of a popular, court-favored, state religion. Court sycophants and hangers-on, who were accustomed to worshiping the Roman emperor as a god and to changing gods with every change of emperors, hastened to get on the new bandwagon and accept baptism into the once-despised Christian faith which had been officially accepted by Constantine. There was no pretense of conversion, or repentance, or godliness. Paganism took over the Christian church.

Henceforth, it was only a matter of time until church and state combined into one entity. Then the offices in the church, which had once been filled by the Spirit of God speaking through godly men set in the church, began to be filled by political maneuverings and secular appointments. Priesthood began to seek after the titles, the dress, and the emoluments of worldly princes and to forget their earlier ideals of service, humility, and unswerving morality. To put it bluntly, and yet as kindly as we may, we believe that the church went into apostasy. Concerning this apostasy, there are two schools of thought. One says that Jesus specifically promised and guaranteed that the forces of evil would never prevail against his church. The other says that the apostasy was expected and expressly foretold by Jesus and the apostles. The proof text of the first school of thought is found in Matthew 16:18, one

of the most controversial texts to be found in the Bible. "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Combined with this we usually find the promise of Matthew 28:20: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." These two texts are alleged to prove that Christ's church never *did* fail, never *can* fail.

We have seen in a preceding chapter that God's whole plan of salvation is based on man's free moral will or agency; that God always respects that agency and under no circumstances takes it away from either individuals or groups of individuals such as churches or nations. Although Christ, the head of the church, cannot fail, the church itself, even its officers and its priesthood, is composed of very human men. Jesus could not absolutely guarantee that his church would never fail without limiting or denying the agency of the men who make up that church. God cannot guarantee that men, even good men, will not fail, without taking away their agency, and *that* he never has done and never will do. His promises are always conditional. A church build upon the rock of Christ and his revealed divinity and Messiahship can never fail so long as the men comprising the church continue to abide upon and build upon this foundation. But let them move to some other foundation, and the promise is of no effect. The literal meaning of apostasy, as drawn from the etymology of the Greek word, is a "standing against, an opposition." One cannot stand *upon* the rock, and at the same time oppose it or "stand against" it.

Jesus promised to be with his apostles until the end of the world *if* they taught all nations "whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20), but the promise is null and void if they use their agency to forsake his teachings and substitute doctrines of their own.

What, then, is the meaning of this famous verse from Matthew 16:18 which asserts that the gates of hell shall not

prevail against the church Christ built? A comparison of various translations helps to explain the problem. Only the Douay and the King James or Authorized versions read, "The gates of *hell* shall not prevail against it." Goodspeed and the Revised Standard Version make it "the powers of death," instead of "the gates of hell." The Emphatic Greek Diaglott and the American Standard Versions read, "the gates of Hades." Moffatt says, "the powers of Hades," and Weymouth, "the might of Hades." "Hades" was the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "sheol," both of which are frequently translated "hell" in the King James Bible, but which simply mean the abode of the dead, the place of spirits. Once we read the text with this obvious meaning for the word "hell" in mind, it is easy to see that Jesus is not talking about a place of punishment, or about the powers of evil, but he is saying simply that Hades, Sheol, or the prison house of death shall not be able to keep him or his church or his gospel or his atonement from breaking into the stronghold of death and releasing the dead through the resurrection into immortal life. The guarded gate was the key to the defense of the walled city. If the gate held fast, or "prevailed," the city was safe. If the gate fell, or did not "prevail," the city was taken. Jesus stormed the gate of Hades, or Sheol, or hell, and the gate fell before him. It did not prevail. He entered in and walked out again on the third day a free man, to declare, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and *have the keys* of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18). The gates of hell fell, did not prevail, before the onslaught of Christ and his church. The third and fourth chapters of I Peter indicate that Christ took his gospel there, preached to the spirits in prison, thus taking his church boldly into the very citadel or stronghold of death. Those gates fell before all who have named the name of Christ, and laid hold on his salvation.

On the other hand, Christ, Peter, John, Jude, and Paul all either foretell or explicitly warn against an apostasy which was

to come, and which was already partly in progress during the days of the first apostles. There is hardly a book of the New Testament which does not warn against apostasy. Christ warned that "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Matthew 24:12). He warned that the violent would take the kingdom by force (Matthew 11:12). He cautioned his disciples, "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you" (John 12:35).

APOSTASY FORETOLD

The epistles of Paul are full of warnings of apostasy, which in some cases are reminders or repetitions of warnings given in person, such as the one uttered to the elders at Ephesus, and recorded in Acts 20:29-31: "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." More than half of the eleventh chapter of II Corinthians, is devoted to warnings of false apostles and their beguiling ways. In almost the opening verses of his letter to the Galatians, Paul marvels that they are "so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel," and warned "though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:6, 8).

In the second epistle to Timothy (3: 1-13) Paul warns that in the last days perilous times shall come, that evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. In the fourth chapter he warns that the time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine, but will "heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (II Timothy 4:3, 4). In I Timothy 4:1-3, Paul warns against

those who "shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; . . . forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats." And in II Thessalonians 2:3, Paul warns that Christ shall not come "except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition." That this is not a prophecy of something altogether in the far distant future is indicated by the seventh verse, "For the mystery of iniquity doth *already* work."

Much of the book of Jude is warning of apostasy. He speaks of mockers walking after their own lusts, and of those who hold men's persons in admiration because of advantage. Peter (II Peter 2:1, 2) warns that there shall be false teachers who shall bring in damnable heresies, denying the Lord that bought them, and causing the way of truth to be evil spoken of. The second chapter of the book of Revelation contains a denunciation of false apostles and those who have left their first love. Much of the first epistle of John is devoted to a condemnation of the Gnostic heresy, and Chapter 4, verse 3 says that the spirit of antichrist is already come into the world.

One of the clearest indications that the New Testament church was to go into apostasy is to be found in the prophecy of the twelfth chapter of John's book of Revelation. Here the church is typified as a woman, the bride of Christ, clothed with the glory of the sun (the light and power and intelligence of God), with the moon of the Mosaic law under her feet, crowned with a crown of twelve stars representing the twelve apostolic offices set in the church. This woman was set upon by a great red dragon, a symbol of paganism, who was waiting to devour her child as soon as it was delivered. That man child which the woman brought forth was the kingdom of God, but to save it from utter destruction immediately after birth, it was caught up to God, and to his throne. "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days" (Revelation 12:6). The church went

into the wilderness. It was not completely destroyed, but it was removed from earth, into a place of no human habitation, a place prepared of God where it could be preserved.

For a picture of the church which took the place of the one which went into the wilderness, we invite you to read the seventeenth chapter of Revelation. John says, "I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication" (Revelation 17:3, 4).

When men departed from the foundation of Christ, the doctrines of Christ, the morality of Christ, the humility and self-sacrifice of Christ, they lost the promises of Christ, the authority of Christ, the power of Christ, the protection and blessing of Christ. Christ could not work through an organization of men which bore slight resemblance in organizational form to the church he established. He could not work through proud, lustful, greedy, heedless, ambitious men. An apostate man is a spiritually dead man; an apostate church is a spiritually dead church. No amount of doctoring can revive a dead man; no amount of reforming can revive a dead church except God, by a new act of creation, shall move to restore again to earth his church with life, with power, with authority, with proper organization, and with the signs, gifts, and blessings which are promised to follow the believer. This miracle of restoration in fulfillment of prophecy shall be discussed in the next chapter, "Bearers of Christ's Authority."