

Sermon Subject: WHAT BECAME OF CHRIST'S CHURCH?

SCRIPTURE: II Thessalonians 2:1-8, Revised Standard Version.

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit, or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness (marg., "sin") is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming.

Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But continue thou in the things thou hast learned and hast been assured of.

If you have been following this series of sermons from the beginning, you have traced with us the development of Christ's church -- a 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 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 become 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 worshipping 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 manouverings 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
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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 sermon 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 either from 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 fall, without taking away their agency, and that he never has done and never will do. His promises are always conditional. A church built 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 things I have commanded you," 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 translation make it "the powers of death," instead of "the gates of Hades." Moffat says, "the power 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 power of evil, but he is simply saying 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." (Rev. 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 fall 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." (Matt. 24:12) He warned that the violent would take the kingdom by force. (Matt. 11:12) He cautioned his disciples to "walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you." (Jn. 12:35)

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."

In the second epistle to Timothy (3:1-15) 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 "accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." (Vs. 3,4, Revised Standard Version) 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 the second chapter of II Thessalonians, which we have used as a scripture reading, 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 7th 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, in 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 12th 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 the 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." 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 one thousand, two hundred sixty days, or a time, times, and half a time.

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 in her fornication."

When men depart from the foundation of Christ, the doctrines of Christ, the morality of Christ, the humility and self-sacrifice of Christ, they lose 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 we shall discuss next week under the subject, A MARVELOUS WORK AND A WONDER.