

# 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 -- of people departing from God. Sadly, this was only the third generation from Joshua. Moses had warned of this possibility in 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 keep before the people that which set them apart from the world.

It is possible that the church can 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 in the New Testament that a gradual apostasy is possible (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; Acts 20:29-31). I want to suggest to you 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 therefore 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 therefore not exclusive in their nature.
2. They differ in their standard.
  - a. The Lord's church uses only the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 4:11; Colossians 3:17).
  - 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 are openly declaring themselves "change agents."
3. They differ in their function.
  - a. The Lord's church has a spiritual function (1 Timothy 3:15; John 6:63). 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 the government.
    - a. The Lord's church has Christ as its head (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23).
    - 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!

## 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 sermons are full of "fluff." Preachers can simply refuse to preach all of the truth. Hard sermons may be preached on topics that everyone agrees upon, such as abortion, but nothing else is 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.
    - c. 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. We can ask questions such as, "What would be wrong with ... ?" or "Do you think our arguments against ... were good arguments?"
    - b. These questions are 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.
    - c. I am starting to see too much preaching that raises questions rather than answers questions. This begins to soften hearts.
  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's wrong with them.
    - b. Anyone who questions these practices will immediately be labeled an "old fogey" or "trying to run the brotherhood" or "brotherhood watchdog."
  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 thirty years, you will have a choir.
- b. Earl West's *The Search For The Ancient Order* traces the development of and splits over instrumental music in the 1840s and they 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. Conservative churches are not immune to this process. Notice some of the 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.
    - 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).
    - c. In fact, 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."
  2. Loose views on worldliness.
    - a. More churches are accepting social drinking and their young people going to dances and the prom and nothing is ever said (1 Peter 4:3; Galatians 5:19).
    - 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.
  3. Loose views on divorce/remarriage and fellowship.
    - a. Just about every possible doctrine is being taught to justify a second or third marriage that is unscriptural.
    - b. Along with this false teaching, Romans 14 is being used to allow false teachers fellowship in the Lord's body. The prevalent attitude is becoming, "Hands off of me and let me teach what I want."
  4. Promotion of the social gospel.
    - a. We are seeing more lectureships and gospel meetings on the subjects of depression, loneliness, aging and ministering to singles.
    - b. We are seeing more churches advertise homecomings and twenty-five or fifty year celebrations for the congregation.
    - c. We are seeing Vacation Bible Schools where there is more emphasis on acting, drama and playing than there is 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 wait on the table.
  - b. We are also seeing women who freely speak out in the worship service and who participate in making decisions in business meetings (1 Timothy 2:11-12).
  - c. We are seeing more arrangements like team teaching where women are teaching older age groups along with men.
- 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.** Unfortunately, it may be later than we think. 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 falsehood (2 John 9-11).

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!