

Discipleship in the Face of Apostasy

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A disciple is one who faithfully adheres to the teachings of his master. And there is but one Master whom we are able to follow as disciples - the Lord Jesus Christ. His teachings have been faithfully preserved for us in the Scriptures. It is, therefore, the mark of every true disciple that he embraces the teachings of the Scriptures, that he promotes them, defends them, and lives according to them. Are you such a disciple?

Because Christ means everything to the true disciple, so does the church institute with its threefold office of minister, elder and deacon. For it's only through the ministry of the Word by the church that Christ is preached to him. In turn, it's through the rule of the elders in the church that Christ rules over him. And so it is with the office of deacon. Through the labors of the deacons every disciple receives the mercies of Christ. The means of grace are inseparably bound up with the church institute. Consequently, every true disciple of Christ seeks to establish and maintain the church institute with other disciples of like mind and spirit.

And that brings us to a very important question that sooner or later faces every disciple of Christ: what is his obligation in the face of apostasy in the church?

That the disciple of Christ should in these last days face apostasy in the church is not surprising. It is only as Christ Himself said it would be. In Matthew 24 we find the discourse of Christ in which He enumerates the signs of His coming. In verses 4 and 5 we read this: "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many." In II Thessalonians 2:3 Christ speaking through the Apostle Paul gives us this warning: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day (i.e., the day of Christ's coming) shall not come, except there come a falling away first." Apostasy in the church, therefore, is one of the signs of Christ's coming.

In this connection, the Scriptures also speak of the rise and development of the false church throughout the New dispensation. This false church is characterized by a complete denial of every truth of God's Word. It gives lip service to the Word of God; and that's why it's so terribly deceptive. But in actual fact it stands opposed to God and His Word. The false church glorifies man rather than God. It's a church that promotes the cause of man, proclaims the gospel of man, and stands completely in the service of man. Its theology is strictly horizontal rather than vertical. It is a church that has excommunicated God and His Christ from its midst. And for that reason it's a church in which Christ no longer works to save and gather His people. This false church is aptly symbolized in Revelation 17 as the great whore who has filled the earth with her fornication.

The rise and development of this false church is obviously connected to apostasy in the church of Christ. The relationship is one of cause and effect. The connection is such that the latter always results in the former. The church that apostatizes from the truth gradually becomes a false church.

We must understand, however, that apostasy is always a process. No true church of Christ becomes a completely false and apostate church overnight. This is rather a process that takes place gradually over the course of time; and for that reason, perhaps, is also undetected by many within the church. But it all starts, as every process does, with the first step. And that first step that leads a church down the long road of apostasy is that the church errs in doctrine. It embraces a false doctrine that stands diametrically opposed to the Scriptures. We may add at this point that this is usually not done in ignorance. The Scriptures never present false doctrine as an intellectual mistake, but rather as a spiritual fault. The truth glorifies God alone. The nature of false doctrine is always that it glorifies man at the expense of God. And, therefore, false doctrine within the church usually arises because there are those who are not satisfied to give God all the glory. They wish to have some of God's glory for themselves. Thus, false doctrine arises. And although at first this departure from the truth may seem very slight and insignificant so that many within the church are not even able to detect its false character, nevertheless it works as a leaven. The truth is one. The truth is a unified whole. No one doctrine of the Scriptures stands in isolation from the rest. They are all interrelated, interconnected, interdependent. No one can consistently deny just one of the truths of God's

Word. Consequently, the church that commits itself to the repudiation of one of the truths of the Scriptures will eventually end up repudiating the whole truth of God's Word. First one truth falls by the way, then another, and another. The preaching becomes less and less God-centered, more and more man-centered. As the preaching falters, so also does the exercise of church discipline. Because doctrine and life are inseparably connected, the church in turn becomes more and more worldly minded. Its members seeks the treasures and pleasures of this world more than the riches of God's kingdom. And so the church is caught in a downward spiral, each generation departing farther from the truth in both doctrine and life than the previous generation. Soon that church becomes a completely false church. Principally it becomes a false church when it first departs from the truth. But as the God-dishonoring leaven of false doctrine works its way through the whole of its doctrine and life, that church eventually becomes a false church in the complete sense of the word.

Apostasy in the church is a very terrible thing. It spells the death of the church and of its members. There are many churches today that are on this road of apostasy. That's quite evident to the discerning child of God. Also this sign of Christ's coming is very much in evidence today. In fact, the terrible rate of apostasy in the church world today indicates that the coming of Christ must be very near. This hardly needs further explanation.

Are you, perhaps, a member of one of these churches?

If so, what is your calling as a disciple of Christ?

The calling of every disciple of Christ who finds himself in this situation is to sound the alarm. It is his calling to point out to his church the errors she has made. She has departed from the truth; she clings to certain God-dishonoring doctrines of men. It is his calling, furthermore, to demonstrate to the church what the end result of her apostasy will be. She will eventually lose her name as a church. She will die, and so will her members. And, therefore, it is the calling of the disciple of Christ to call the church to repentance as did the prophet Ezekiel. "Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" Ezekiel 33:11.

In other words, it is the calling of every disciple who finds himself in an apostatizing church to engage in church reformation. That's simply required of him. The honor and glory of God require it. His love for the church requires it. His love for the fellow saints requires it. To do anything less is to deny one's discipleship!

How does one engage in such church reformation? Does he do that by joining himself to others of like mind in the church, from organizations within the church, and through the printed page launch an attack on certain decisions that the ecclesiastical bodies of his church have made? Does he do this by passing around petitions to be signed? By presenting ultimatums to the church? By playing the game of church politics? Or by making an appeal to the churches in general? This is neither the Scriptural way (cf. I Cor. 14:40), nor is it the proper way according to the Reformed (Presbyterian) system of church government.

According to the Reformed system of church government, the only proper way to engage in church reformation is the way of protest and appeal. Should a child of God see his church or denomination deviate from God's Word, it is his calling to lodge a protest against that deviation in the proper ecclesiastical manner. This is not only everyone's right, but also his duty. And should his protest fail to steer the church away from its error, his calling is to appeal to the higher ecclesiastical assemblies until he can appeal no more. Membership in a church governed by the Reformed principles of church government binds the individual to conduct church reformation in this way. He may not remain a member of his church and then simply militate against its decisions in any way he sees fit.

The objection is often raised that this way of protest and appeal never accomplishes anything. Protest after protest has simply fallen on deaf ears. Protest and appeal all you want; but the church will simply brush it all aside and go its merry way.

If such is the case, it has only indicated that the church has firmly committed itself to the way of apostasy. It neither wants the truth; nor will it, as a church, ever return to the truth. In that case, the disciple of Christ has but one calling - to separate from that church and institute the church anew. Or should there be an already existing church that is still faithful to the Word of God, to join himself to that church. But in either case, it is his calling to separate

himself from that apostatizing church, which has obviously committed its way to apostasy, and to bring out as many of his brethren as he can.

Such is the calling of every disciple of Christ.

Needless to say, this is not an easy calling to fulfill. This is especially true when his calling is to separate himself from his mother church. That's not something that the true disciple easily does. Yet, separate he must, after all protests have failed and it becomes obvious that the church has committed its way to apostasy with no intention of returning to the truth.