

It Is Written

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How A Church Loses Its Distinctiveness

By Tom Holland

When "called out" people who are supposed to be distinct and committed to the Lord and His Word become like everyone else, what right do they have to make a claim that they are a "church of Christ"?

The Lord Jesus created His church to be distinctive. This fact is seen in the concept of the church as the "called-out" ones. The church Jesus created consists of people who have been called out of the world by the gospel (II Thessalonians 2:13-14). Furthermore, the distinctiveness of the Lord's church is seen in the identification of its members as "saints" (I Corinthians 1:2 NKJV). People who make up the Lord's church have been called to be saints or holy people, people who have been set apart, distinctive people (I Peter 1:15).

When a church of Christ loses its distinctiveness, it is no longer the Lord's church. That church may still claim to belong to the Lord, but a body without a spirit is dead (Revelation 3:1). The Lord knows how and when to "remove the candlestick" (Revelation 2:5).

What is involved in a church losing its distinctiveness? Recognizing and understanding how this loss happens to a church may serve as an admonition to elders, preachers, and congregations. Knowledge could provide the criteria for evaluating the spiritual statue of a congregation.

Loss Of Conviction

A perusal of the New Testament epistles reveals a corpus of information identified as "the truth" (I Timothy 2:4; II Timothy 2:15). Jesus declared the reality of this truth (John 8:32). Strong congregations are built on a solid foundation of truth that is known, believed, and obeyed. People in the Lord's church believe something, stand for something, and reject any doctrine or teaching inconsistent with the truth. The ethics of the New Testament church are based on a solid doctrinal foundation.

For example, the way God's people are to live is grounded in sound doctrine (Titus 2:1-8,11-14). This paradigm is in Paul's inspired epistles. The ethical emphasis in Ephesians is based on the truth of God's eternal purpose that made the church a living reality (Titus 3:10-11,20-21). Examine the doctrine of the nature and preeminence of Christ and observe how a conviction of the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ and obedience to that truth impacts the life of a person (Colossians 2:11-12).

The truth reveals how people are to respond to God's love and grace so they can be saved by Him (I Timothy 2:4). Any person with a good and honest heart can read the book of Acts and understand what he must do to be saved by the Lord Jesus (Luke 8:15). He will not find the "faith-only" approach or the so-called, man-invented "sinner's prayer." Faith is an essential; repentance is an imperative; and baptism upon a confession of faith is required. God's people have a conviction about God's way of saving people (Acts 10:34-35).

Today, postmodernism with its obsession with relativism rejects absolute knowledge and thereby casts a cloud of doubt on conviction. "Love" becomes permissiveness; the biblical doctrine of grace is distorted into a flirtation with universalism or the embracing of the denominational assertion of individual predestination and foreordination. God's sovereignty is so exaggerated that God is supposedly responsible for man's salvation or man's condemnation.

God's people have a conviction about specific avenues or acts of true worship that they will not sacrifice on altars of crowd-pleasing entertainment (John 4:24). Saints refuse to let the culture dictate the manner of life that God calls His people to follow (Ephesians 5:1-17). The first step in the loss of

distinctiveness has been taken when people are "always learning" but never able to come to a "a knowledge of the truth" (II Timothy 3:7).

Compromise

A rejection of the truth, a conviction against conviction, prepares a church for the next step in the loss of distinctiveness -- compromise. After all the debates and the years of ridicule and misrepresentations, a church that has lost conviction of God's truth is ready now to rush to "the plains of Ono" (Nehemiah 6:2).

Compromise is evident when biblical doctrine about God's Way of saving the lost is said to be "church of Christ tradition" and when following the God-ordained way to praise Him with singing accompanied with the human heart (Ephesians 5:19) is called "a church of Christ tradition." Compromise is seen when people reject the necessity for biblical authority for what is believed and practiced in religion. Their justification is that other religious people are sincere in what they believe and practice, and "they feel good about what they do in religion."

Compromise with its distorted view of love will bless people with fellowship who are not walking in the light (I John 1:3-10). In its broadest sense, compromise can be seen in some people's claim that even good Muslims can be saved by their god Allah, regardless of what Jesus declared in John 14:6.

Conformity

Once a church has rejected conviction of truth and compromised with false doctrine, the next step is inevitable -- that church will begin to conform to the religion of the day.

The doctrines of denominationalism, such as unconditional grace, will begin to be heard from preachers, and elders will defend them. Human practices, such as the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship, will be introduced. Special days of human origin such as the religious observance of Christmas and Easter will be embraced.

God's people wanted to be like the nations around them (I Samuel 8:5). That desire did not happen without first rejecting God's Law. When "called-out" people who are supposed to be distinct and committed to the Lord and His Word become like everyone else, what right do they have to make a claim that they are a "church of Christ?"

When conformity rules, those who have the ideal and objective of restoring the plea to be like the church the Lord created in the first century are scorned, ridiculed, and sometimes caricatured for wanting to perpetuate "the church of the 1950s" in the 21st century. The loss of distinctiveness is a sad revelation of the loss of dedication to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the church that He created and for which He gave His blood.

The Work Of Priests

By Kyle Campbell

Malachi 2:7-8 says, "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts." Several hundred years before Christ, the priests of Israel would not tell the people what they needed to hear, which incurred the wrath of God.

In 1 Peter 2:5, it says, "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." Christians function as priests, and we have the responsibility to spread the word too. Jesus charged His disciples to spread the word before He ascended into heaven (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15). The priests of old wouldn't tell people what they needed to hear. Have we caused any to stumble because we refuse to do the same? "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).