

#3 The Conditions in the World and in the Church in the Last Days

In the days of the apostles, the scope of their world was vastly different from ours. They knew about prejudice and persecution; about the rigors of daily life in needing to provide for their physical needs while still keeping perspective on their spiritual calling; about the difficulties of travel and cultural adjustments; and the disappointments of rejection, jail, or betrayal. But the world itself was narrow to them by comparison. Today our world is a global village, we have an information superhighway, our knowledge is not only of our own world but space beyond, and we not only have global coverage on TV, we have explained to us what all the international implications are for any given event at any given moment.

Bob Hope had an interesting observation. He said, "It's a wonderful world. It may destroy itself but you'll be able to watch it on TV."

As I mentioned last week, the "Last Days" are not something we're waiting for in the future, but they began when Jesus died. The Father knows the time of His Son's Second Coming and each day is a countdown toward that time. Is the world living in fear and dread? Is the Second Coming the "hot topic" over coffee each morning wondering if it will be today?

No, we saw in our lesson that just as it was in the days of Noah, people are carrying on life as usual -- weddings, parties, jobs, child-rearing -- but most have no concern for the things of God. They scoff -- turn to that passage in 2 Peter 3:3-7 and let me show you a little 3 point outline.

1. There is something to know about the present (vs. 3) -- Scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.
2. Something to remember about the past (vs. 4-6) -- Things have **not** gone on as they were since creation, they forget about the judgment of the flood that destroyed the wicked world and only eight were saved.
3. Something to count on in the future (vs.7) -- The present heavens and earth are reserved for a judgment by fire and the destruction of ungodly men.

Shrug it off, scoff at the warning, disbelieve -- it doesn't change the fact of God's word. Isaiah 40:8 "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

That was a pretty sobering list of mankind's characteristics that we listed from 2 Timothy 3:1-5, wasn't it? It's all around us and, if we're honest, we probably looked and said, "Woe -- I'm in there." And my friends, I earnestly pray that it isn't the last one that has a hold on us -- "Having a form of godliness, but denying its power." We can't play at being Christians, looking good/talking God talk. We must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit must be given reign in our life to conform us into His image.

Lover of self must become lover of others -- Lover of money must become a model of generosity -- Boastfulness becomes humility -- Unforgiveness becomes acceptance and a forgiveness, etc. Only intimacy with the Almighty God can do that.

I know you had no trouble finding examples of those characteristics in today's world, but listen to this:

"Our youths love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, they show disrespect for their elders and love to chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their household. They no longer rise when their elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up food, and tyrannize teachers." Signed --- Socrates, 400 BC

What can we do -- you, me, us? You know how a top spins so fast and eventually topples -- we get that feeling that the world is spinning faster and faster out of control until it topples. Jesus said we were to be salt and light in the world. What can we do? I suggest four things:

1. Know the word of God and what His standard is. Mankind wants to measure itself by itself. (Well, I'm better than he is.) We need to measure using God's yardstick.
2. Call sin -- sin. Adultery is not an "affair." Homosexuality is not "an alternative lifestyle." "Living together" is fornication.
3. Blush. We become more and more conditioned to the world's standards of morality and acceptability, that we become desensitized. This new group of fall TV shows is unbelievable when it comes to what is okay for prime time viewing. People -- we need to learn to blush . . . and flush.

4. You can make a difference. I'm reminded of the story about a man out strolling on the beach after a storm and seeing hundreds of starfish thrown ashore and helplessly stranded by the great waves. Once the morning sun burned through the clouds, the starfish would dry out and die. Suddenly, he saw a young boy picking up a starfish one at a time and flinging them back into the ocean. "Why are you doing that? You'll never be able to get them all back into the water. There are just too many of them. It won't make any difference." "That's true," replied the boy as he hurled another one back into the waves, "but it sure made a difference to that one."

Your influence, your example, your compassion -- you as salt and light is what Jesus counts on.

What about conditions in the church in the last days?

Back in the first century, the announcement that there was to be a "church" was the biggest spiritual news to hit the world in 2,000 years. That God had chosen a specific people, Israel, everyone knew. The news that God was now to begin selecting a second chosen people was a real bombshell. There was not even a hint of it given in the Old Testament. A part of the mystery was that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, one body and partakers of God's promises in Christ through the gospel. Now there was no distinction -- Greek/Jew, male/female, slave/free -- all were one in Christ.

One might think that the church would have enjoyed immediate success as Christ began to build it, but He warned in Matthew 13 about the tares (weeds) that would come in and look just like the others, but were really sons of the evil one. Right from the beginning the church faced Satanic opposition from the outside as well as error and disruption from within. The church has always had a difficult existence in the world because the world has never had a clear understanding what it's all about and what it's doing here in the first place. Since the time of Christ, Christians have been "strangers and pilgrims" on earth struggling to be ambassadors for Christ to a cynical and perverse race of men. The church, like the Jews, has faced persecution in the world from all sides. You have only to read Fox's Book of Martyrs for bone-chilling accounts of what Christians have endured for their faith. We should never minimize physical persecution, it still goes on today in the world, for us here in the United States with the freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution, we are much more acquainted with the internal threat to the church which the New Testament so clearly warns about and that is APOSTASY.

Let me give you a brief thumbnail sketch of some events in church history. The apostles died off and under Constantine, the church became a popular organization. One of the first casualties of turning from the word of God was the departure from the doctrine of the premillennial coming of Christ and the establishment of His millennial kingdom. The teaching arose that Christ could not come back until a thousand years had passed and this was based on the erroneous idea that the church was already in the millennium and that the millennium had to run its course before Christ could return.

The next important casualty in scriptural doctrine was the departure from grace beginning with Augustine and his theology. The Roman Catholic church maintained that grace was channeled through the church and the sacraments and, apart from them, there could be no true salvation or bestowal of grace. As a result, the doctrine of justification by faith, the truth of the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit, and the truth that believers had immediate access to the throne of grace without an earthly priest as mediator became dim. Soon the authority of scripture became subordinate to the authority of the church and the interpretation of the church took precedence over the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. The word of God was chained to the pews and there was the spiritual darkness of the Middle Ages.

The Protestant Reformation brought a fresh study of great essential Christian truths. Once again the Word of God was made the ultimate authority. The clear teaching that every Christian is a priest with direct access to God was renewed. But, no longer shackled by the restrictions of the church, the enlightenment freed men's minds and wills to accept the idea that they could do as they pleased. Mystics arose, critics began to divide the Bible and challenge authorship and apostasy invaded Protestantism with the same devastating effect it had on the Roman Church.

The virgin birth was questioned, skepticism arose concerning final judgment and the existence of heaven or hell. The love of God was regarded as making impossible a God of righteous judgment.

The 20th century marked a departure from Biblical Christianity but also signaled the rise of some new and confusing heresies. Multiplied cults and new forms of religion arose with varied degrees of allegiance to Christianity, but a new combination of old errors emerged.

An old Redbook magazine (August 1961) article titled "Startling Beliefs of Future Ministers" had statistics. It said:

"The publishers hired one of the top pollsters in the nation to survey a full representation of our seminaries which are supposedly preparing men for Christian service in the Protestant churches. Here are some of the results -- compare them carefully with what the Bible says about apostasy.

"Of the ministers in training, 56 percent rejected the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, 71 percent rejected that there was life after death. 54 percent rejected the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. 98 percent rejected that there would be a personal return of Jesus Christ to this earth." Shocking, isn't it!

You know, originally 88 of the first 100 colleges founded in America were organized to promote the gospel and the claims of Jesus Christ. Every collegiate institution founded in the colonies prior to the Revolutionary War - except the University of Pennsylvania - was established by some branch of the Christian church. Listen to this:

The first college, Harvard, has this above its gates: "After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had built our houses, provided necessities for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship and settled the civil government: one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity: dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust." 52% of Harvard graduates in the 17th century became ministers.

Yale's president said, "Christ is the only, the true, the living way of access to God. Give up yourselves therefore to Him, with a cordial confidence, and the great work of life is done."

King's College, now Columbia opened in 1754 with this advertisement, "The chief thing that is aimed at in this college is to teach and engage children to know God in Jesus Christ."

Princeton in its early days insisted that the faculty be convinced of the necessity of salvation. John Witherspoon, the first president, wrote "cursed be all learning that is contrary to the cross of Christ."

William and Mary was established that the Christian faith might be propagated. Dartmouth was founded to train men as missionaries to the Indians.

Today -- all have apostatized . . . fallen away from their foundation of faith.

Like erosion, apostasy can slowly creep into church. There's a story of a farmer who was upset about the high price of oats for his mule, so he decided to gradually substitute sawdust in the diet. Everything went fine for a while, but by the time the mule was satisfied with just sawdust, he died.

The same is true spiritually. The changeover from truth to error is sometimes a slow process and people don't know the difference. But before you know it, they're dead. Our defense is to know the Word of God.

First we must learn from the Scriptures the characteristic teachings and activities of apostasy, so we can recognize it. Then we should compare with Scripture the things being taught by our religious leaders to see if there is any discrepancy. Is it truth or are our ears being tickled . . . being told what we want to hear?

One observation we make about church today is its worldliness. Vance Havner wrote "The church is so worldly and the world is so churchy . . . it's hard to tell the difference between the two." Though there are thousands of faithful congregations and many pious Christians still bearing faithful testimony to Christ in our modern day, it is also true that often it is the exception rather than the rule that the great fundamentals of the church ring from the pulpit and for the people in the pew to manifest the transforming grace of God in their lives and sacrificial devotion.

When we get into the book of Revelation we're going to study about the desire for a one world church. The Ecumenical (that means worldwide) movement of end times has a goal of a one-religion world. Breaking down barriers that divide us is an admirable goal, providing the doctrinal basics are kept pure. Unity is not conformity at any cost.

What are the doctrines or teachings that characterize apostasy?

1. Denial of the doctrine of the Trinity (1 John 2:22-23).
2. Denial of the incarnation of Christ (1 John 2:22, 4:3; 2 John 7).
3. Denial of the doctrine of the return of Christ (2 Peter 3:4).

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, said this, "I consider that the chief dangers which confront the twentieth century will be:

Religion without the Holy Spirit

Christianity without Christ

Forgiveness without regeneration

Morality without God

Heaven without Hell."

I think there is little doubt that we are in the "last of the last days." Signs of the times are everywhere. So what are we to do? Jesus summed it up in Matthew 24 as He gave us five encouragements . . . Do not be DECEIVED, DISCOURAGED, DEFEATED, DOUBTFUL, or DISTRACTED.

1. Do not be deceived (4,11) -- You have the Word of God to enlighten you and the Holy Spirit to teach you. You can keep from going astray!

2. Do not be discouraged (6) -- Political and natural disturbances have always been a part of world history. They are the beginning of sorrows/birth pangs. The world's troubles are pregnant with possibilities! God is still on the throne!

3. Do not be defeated (13) -- Do not let the lawlessness around you rob you of your zeal. This lost world needs your salt and light and to hear the gospel. So get busy!

4. Do not be doubtful (34,35) -- Religious leaders will come and go, stand and fall, but the Word of God does not change. Believe it, obey it, hold to it no matter what others may say or do.

5. Do not be distracted (42) -- We are to watch . . . the Lord may come at any time. Focus on Him! Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

QUESTIONS?