

APOSTASY: WHEN DOES A CHURCH CROSS THE LINE?

By Wayne Camp

Revelation 2:4-5 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Revelation 3:15-16 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

INTRODUCTION

How far into apostasy can a church go without crossing the line and ceasing to be one of the Lord's churches? Let me emphasize that in this article I am not concerned with churches that have never been true churches. Churches which came out of the Protestant Reformation have never been true churches. Pentecostal churches have never been true New Testament churches. Campbellite churches have never been true churches. I will be writing only of those churches that started out as true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ but have erred from the faith once delivered to the saints.

I have known brethren who were "experts" on identifying churches that had crossed the line and cease to be New Testament churches. They prided themselves in unchurching churches and reorganizing them according to their own pattern. In fact, I just learned recently that there are those who believe that any church that does not hold to the doctrine known as "King James onlyism" has crossed the line and has ceased to be a true church. They do this in spite of the fact that this unchurches all churches prior to A.D. 1611. Considering the high importance and preciousness of the Lord's churches to himself I have always been very concerned about such things. I have also been very careful about declaring that what once was apparently a true New Testament church to no longer be such.

SOME CHURCHES NAMED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ERRED GREATLY

It is evident from Scripture that a church can go seriously into error and still be a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider the church at Corinth. There were those among that church's membership who denied the resurrection of the dead and thereby denied the resurrection of Jesus Christ. ***1 Corinthians 15:12 Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?***

I once preached a series of sermons on the errors in the church at Corinth. It has been a long time since I preached that series but if I remember correctly there were sixteen or seventeen different errors which Paul rebuked in his first epistle to this church. Yet, it is very evident that he considered this church to be a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. ***1 Corinthians 1:2 Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every***

place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours. Paul did not hesitate to refer to it as **“the church of God which is at Corinth.”**

Many in the churches of Galatia had been hoodwinked by false teachers on the matter of salvation being wholly of grace. **Galatians 3:1-3 O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?**

These folks had heard the gospel, had, through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, believed the gospel, and had been saved by Jesus Christ. But some Judaizing teachers had misled them into believing, among other things, that their salvation was not quite complete unless they were circumcised. This is a very serious error into which they had been led. In fact, it was so serious, that when some of the same type of Judaizing teachers came to Antioch propagating the same error, Paul and Barnabas withstood them. The contention became so great that the church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas and others to Judea to confer with the apostles and elders of the church at Jerusalem on the matter. **Acts 15:1-2 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.**

I have heard some say that if a church errs at all on the way of salvation it has gone into apostasy and ceases to be one of the Lords churches. Apparently, Paul did not agree with this contention. He wrote a letter to the churches of Galatia rebuking this error but there is not a hint that they were not true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. He warned them of those who had led them astray. **Galatians 1:6-9 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But 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. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.**

These are very strong words against those who were propagating, among the churches of Galatia, a false doctrine concerning the way of salvation. And while he was amazed that these Christians in Galatia had been led astray by these false teachers there is no indication that they had ceased to be true New Testament churches. So it is possible for a church (or churches) to err in following false teachers into such serious error without losing its credentials as a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, this complicates the question before us in this article. **When does a church cross the line?**

SCRIPTURE DOES INDICATE THAT A CHURCH CAN ERR TO THE POINT THAT SHE CEASES TO BE A TRUE CHURCH OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

I do not believe that the warnings found in our texts are idle threats but are serious warnings. Our first text indicates that it is possible for a church to go so far from her first love that the candlestick will be removed. ***I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.***

An examination of the words of commendation that Jesus sent to this church indicates that they were orthodox in their theology and zealous in their works. ***Revelation 2:2-3 I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.*** Is it possible that such a highly commended church could be in danger of crossing the line? Is it possible that a church that teaches the “five points” of sovereign grace and is zealous for church truth and practice could be in danger of crossing the line? Apparently that is possible!

The congregation at Ephesus had left their first love. Without arguing the point, I believe that the church's first love should be Jesus Christ and the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are churches who chew the biscuit of orthodoxy very thoroughly with one exception; they leave out Jesus Christ. Have you ever heard a sermon on the doctrine of election without hearing of Jesus Christ? I have! Have you ever heard a sermon on the doctrine of the church without hearing about Jesus Christ? I have! It would be mentioned that Jesus founded the first church on earth, but there was little of Christ and much of the church.

Have you heard sermons on the proper element in the Lord's Supper, who is to observe the supper, and other aspects of that ordinance with little attention to the fact that it is to be observed in memory of the broken body and shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ? If we are not careful we can get so wound up being correct in orthodoxy and almost forget about Christ.

I believe that each of the five points is a part of the gospel. I do not subscribe to the idea that we should leave those alone and “just preach Jesus” as some say. On the other hand, when we preach total depravity we should not neglect to preach that the remedy for human depravity is found in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. We should not neglect to emphasize that the fall of the first Adam necessitated the death of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. It would also be good to emphasize that when Christ came into the world he came in the likeness of sinful flesh. It would be well to declare that God made Jesus to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

When we teach and preach unconditional election Christ should be central in that doctrine. We should not get so caught up in proving that it is unconditional and sovereign that we forget to declare that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation world. When we preach the limited atonement we should not get so involved in teaching that it is limited that we forget to lay out clearly who made that atonement. In short, the declaration of fundamental doctrines should never leave out Jesus Christ. He should be our first love.

To the church at Ephesus Jesus said, ***“I have somewhat against you because you***

have left your first love.” He then called on that church to repent of this error and warned them that failure to repent would bring about the removal of the candlestick.

A church may go into serious error and not lose its status as a church of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, failure to repent of that error will put them over the line. There can be no error worse than impenitence on the part of a New Testament church. Impenitence would have put the church in Ephesus over the line.

In our second text Jesus warns the church of Laodicea that unless they repented he would spew them out of his mouth. ***I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.***

If a church is not careful prosperity can be its worst enemy. A church that can be in the world but not have the world in the church is especially blessed. This is not the case with Laodicea. The world was in the church. Materialism was an obsession with them. With that materialism came arrogance and self-sufficiency. ***Revelation 3:17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.*** Their wealth and self-sufficiency blinded them to their miserable spiritual condition. They had put Jesus on the outside. ***Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.***

One might be tempted to say that a church that has no room for Christ has crossed the line and ceased to be a true New Testament church. But Jesus still loved this church. Notice that Lord still called on this church to repent which indicates he had not yet spewed it out of his mouth. ***Revelation 3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.*** They had not crossed the line completely but were in danger of doing so. Their only hope was to repent of their worldliness and self-sufficiency and return to their fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Just as God-wrought repentance was the deliverance for the church at Ephesus and the church at Laodicea it was also the deliverance for the church at Corinth. ***2 Corinthians 7:8-9 For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.***

CONCLUSION

Finally, I may not have been as conclusive and definite about how a church can cross the line and ceased to be a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ as some would be. The Lord is more concerned with calling churches that err to repentance than he is with casting them out as true churches. True churches are lights in this sin darkened world. Jesus is more concerned with trimming their wicks than he is with spewing them out of his mouth. We need to be more like Christ in dealing with erring churches.