

Christianity in Crisis

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—Matthew 13:30

THIS IS A DAY OF DISINTE-gration, chaos, and confusion in human society. Former standards of righteousness are put aside, and traditional viewpoints and values are in disfavor. This is particularly true in the religious world. In an attempt to stand up against this time of change, the churches are attempting

in various ways to increase their influence in the face of growing religious dissatisfaction, and even apathy, which threatens their very existence. The ecumenical spirit of goodwill and cooperation is leading to a breakdown of doctrinal teachings, and slowly reducing denominationalism to what amounts to, in many cases, a vast social club in which the vital teachings of the Bible are given almost no consideration. While this is especially true of Protestantism, the Catholic Church is also being shaken from within and without by scandal and the exposure of moral evil within its hierarchy.

In the April 9, 2012 issue of *Newsweek* magazine, in an article titled “The Forgotten Jesus,” the author addresses the reality that organized Christianity has left the simple teachings of Jesus. He states, “Christianity has been destroyed by politics, priests, and get-rich evangelists.” He then boldly admonishes, “Ignore them, and embrace Him.” The simple teachings of Jesus, the author says, include such things as: love one another, even your enemies; forgive those who sin against you; do not pursue, but sacrifice, material wealth; do not seek power over others; avoid violence with your fellow-man; love the great God who created us in his image. Such doctrines are the essence of the teaching and example Jesus gave to us to live by as a follower of him. Yet, how different from these principles is the legacy of Christendom for much of the past two thousand years, and which continues unabated today.

POLITICIZING RELIGION

The author of the above-referenced article asks these deeply probing questions about religious faith and politics: “What does it matter how strictly you proclaim your belief in various doctrines if you do not live as these doctrines demand? What is politics if not a dangerous temptation toward controlling others rather than reforming oneself?” He goes on to say that in this country today, politics and religion are mixed together to the point of saturation. Each side of the political aisle has brought religion, and the name of God, to foster and promote their respective agendas. From abortion to health care, from justifying war to taking credit for peace,

politics has embraced the mixture of religious issues into its unending and wearying rhetoric.

For many, the incessant mixing of politics and religion has turned them to a deep distrust of the political powers that be, as well as of those who wish to be in power, but who are not at present. Not surprisingly, many also have turned away from mainstream religion—some to meditation and yoga, others to self-help, still others to various methods of obtaining “spirituality,” and an ever-increasing number simply to atheism.

PROSPERITY GOSPEL

The *Newsweek* article points out that although the Catholic and traditional Protestant denominations have declined rapidly in recent decades, at least partially filling the vacuum has been Evangelical Protestantism and, in particular, Televangelism. One of the more recent themes of these movements is the embracing of, as the author says, “a gospel of prosperity.” Well-known televangelist and author Joel Osteen is quoted as saying, “God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, creativity. . . . Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough.” Other widely-followed evangelists have preached much the same thing.

While the desire for God’s blessings is well and proper, one must wonder at the fact that such a “prosperity doctrine” was never taught by Jesus and the Apostles. Neither was it the way they lived. Note these numerous statements from the Master concerning earthly treasure and riches. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where

moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” “Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. . . . Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.” “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt. 6:19-21; 19:21,23; 16:24) Concerning himself, Jesus humbly said, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”—Matt. 8:20

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, warned him, and us, about the deceitfulness of riches, and beyond that, the evil of coveting such things. He says, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”—I Tim. 6:6-10

It is clear from the above words of Jesus and Paul, as well as many other statements of the Scriptures, that God is not the author of such a “gospel of prosperity.” Yet, it is very popular today among

many professing Christians. This is because it is what they want to hear. Man wants to hear their ministers counsel them to seek wealth. They want to hear it said that “God wants to increase you financially.” At the same time, man does not want to be taught about sacrifice, to deny themselves, or to understand the dangers of seeking earthly riches. Quite happily then, many evangelists speak of the things which their hearers desire most to hear, though they foster greed, selfishness, and pride.

SOCIAL GOSPEL

Another “gospel” of today which has gained much popularity is what might be termed the “social gospel.” In part, at least, this is as a result of the traditional church’s failures over the centuries to meet the pastoral needs of their members. The social gospel can perhaps be best described by using the current example of a Protestant “mega-church” located in a large metropolitan area. A recent visit to this church’s website noted many activities and services which, like the gospel of prosperity, are a far cry from the simple church organization and operation taught by Jesus and the Apostles. The website states that over fifteen thousand attend their Sunday services, and they incorporate a staff of over one hundred fifty people in various capacities. Their church facilities encompass over 160,000 square feet (the equivalent of more than three football fields), and when built several years ago cost \$42 million to construct. So large is their attendance that local police are required to direct traffic before and after their services. In addition to “normal” church services, a glance at their church

calendar reveals these other scheduled activities in coming weeks: an arts camp; classes on parenting; community service events; an “evening of Broadway;” and a guest motivational speaker. Finally, the website notes that services include a full band, and boasts that a restaurant is also part of the church facility.

Here again, we wonder at such numbers, size, cost, and the many activities outside the pattern given to us of the simple meetings held in the homes of the Early Church members. While the activities mentioned above are not in themselves wrong, and, in fact, are in many ways admirable, the environment created by these things has resulted in “going to church” becoming more of a social event than one of real spiritual learning and development. The Apostle Paul criticized the church at Corinth because of this very thing. Their meetings together had become a social event, of eating and drinking, and not of worshipping the Lord. He chided them, saying, “When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse Have you not houses to take your meals in? or have you no respect for the church of God? . . . What am I to say to you? am I to give you praise? certainly not.”—I Cor. 11:17,22, *Bible in Basic English*

Jesus counseled the woman at the well concerning the way in which God should be worshipped. He said, “The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:23,24) Stephen, when witnessing before

the high priest, testified that big buildings made with human hands did not constitute the dwelling place of God. "Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?"—Acts 7:48,49

CRISIS IN CHRISTIANITY

The author of the *Newsweek* article concludes that Christianity is in crisis. Yet, a recent poll shows a large majority of Americans still believe in a higher power. The real crisis, the author suggests, is with the Christian institutions themselves—their ideas and priorities. Quoting his concluding thoughts: "I have no concrete idea how Christianity will wrestle free of its current crisis, of its distractions and temptations, and above all its enmeshment with the things of this world. . . . Living each day doing what we can to fulfill God's will, is more vital than ever. . . . We need radical spiritual change."

CONDITIONS FORETOLD

One of the prophecies which foretold of the conditions which would come upon churchianity is the parable of the wheat and the tares. This parable is recorded in Matthew 13:24-30, and Jesus' explanation is set forth in verses 38-43 of the same chapter. In the parable, Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field." His explanation is, "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom." The "sowing" of this good seed—the children of the kingdom—by the Son of man is a reference to Jesus'

work of establishing the church, beginning with his apostles.

What a meaningful title Jesus gave to his faithful followers—"the children of the kingdom." Jesus came to earth to fulfill all the wonderful kingdom promises of the Bible. His death as the Redeemer, his resurrection, his Second Coming [Greek, Presence], and the establishing of his kingdom, are all related to the divine kingdom plan. Those called to follow Jesus during this present Gospel Age are promised that, if faithful, they will live and reign with him in his kingdom. We can think of no other title which would so aptly identify the wheat class of the parable.

TARES SOWN

The parable continues: "While men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also." Jesus explains: "The tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the Devil." The Devil is the prince of this world, and has opposed the outworking of the divine plan in every way he could. In this parable, he is seen sowing tares among the wheat in an effort to choke out and destroy "the children of the kingdom."

Tares are an imitation of wheat, and the contrast in the parable is between those who are imbued with the true hope of Christ's kingdom, and those who, throughout the age, have espoused efforts to set up a counterfeit kingdom of their own making. The church-state systems of Europe were part of the fruitage of these efforts. The social and prosperity

gospels of today are another. Noble men and women throughout the age have devoted time and energy to the various efforts which have been designed to set up Christ's kingdom without Christ. They have called their institutions "Christendom"—Christ's kingdom—but in reality these efforts have not had the divine approval. Those who have unwittingly served Satan in these various undertakings are quite properly described in the parable as "children of the wicked one," not because they are morally wicked, but because they have cooperated, and continue to cooperate, in efforts instigated by Satan.

THE HARVEST

In the parable, the servants of the householder ask if they should uproot the tares from the field, to which the reply is given, "Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn." Jesus' explanation of this segment of the parable is, "The harvest is the end of the world [age]; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world [age]. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth [great disappointment]. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

The closing lines of the parable are of special importance to us because they relate to the culmination

of the Lord's work during the period of time in his plan which we speak of as the Gospel Age. Jesus said that in the end of this age there would be a "harvest" in which the tares would be gathered into bundles and burned, and the wheat class ultimately would "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

The tares are said to be burned in a furnace of fire. Fire is one of the symbols used in the Bible to portray the great time of destructive trouble which would come upon the world at the end of this age. Every aspect of Satan's world is destroyed in this trouble, including the tares of the parable. This does not imply their destruction as individuals, but as tares. When the "fire" of this day of the Lord shall have accomplished its full purpose, there will no longer be those who, in the name of Christ, attempt to reform and rule the world through their own fallen efforts. The individuals who were part of these "tare" systems, during Christ's earthly kingdom, will have their eyes opened to a knowledge of God's true plan and purpose for mankind. They will then see that his plan and kingdom are infinitely superior to any of their former efforts to bring peace and happiness to the families of the earth.

When wheat is harvested and put in the barn, the season's work is accomplished, for the wheat is now ready to be used. The work of the Gospel Age has been to develop a class who would prove worthy to live and reign with Christ in his kingdom. In the parable, Jesus explains the culmination and objective of this work as the wheat shining forth "as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." This

will be the reward of all the wheat class, “the children of the kingdom.”

The parable shows that there are two aspects of the work of harvest—the gathering and burning of the tares, and the harvesting of the wheat. According to the parable, both these aspects of the harvest are accomplished by “the angels.” The Greek word here translated “angels” simply means “messengers.” In a number of instances in the New Testament, this word is applied to human servants of God, and it is also used to identify those on the spirit plane who are “sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation.” (Heb. 1:13,14) This word is properly used to describe any messenger of God, regardless of the plane of life on which he exists.

JEWISH AGE HARVEST

There was a “harvest” at the close of the Jewish Age. Jesus referred to this when he said to his disciples, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.” (Matt. 9:37,38) The laborers, or “messengers,” in that harvest were the faithful disciples of Christ, Jesus being the Chief Reaper of that harvest. The work of that harvest was accomplished largely by the proclamation of the Gospel of the kingdom. This kingdom Gospel appealed to the devout of Israel who cherished the Messianic kingdom hope. These were the wheat of that harvest, and they were also the laborers in the harvest.

John the Baptist said of Jesus, the Chief Reaper in the Jewish Age harvest, that he would “gather his wheat into the garner; [and] . . . burn up the

chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:12) The Scriptures do not refer to wheat and tares in the Jewish Age harvest, but to wheat and “chaff,” and the chaff is shown to be destroyed by fire. This undoubtedly is a reference to the severe trouble brought upon the nation of Israel by Titus and his army around the year A.D. 70. In John the Baptist’s prophecy, he speaks of Jesus as being responsible for it. The pure wheat of that time became the nucleus of “the children of the kingdom,” who have been developed during the Gospel Age.

The harvesting of the wheat at the close of the Jewish Age was accomplished by the proclamation of the kingdom Gospel by Jesus’ disciples. This is also true at the close of the Gospel Age. The wheat class now are the angels, or messengers, to gather the wheat, just as it was then. We believe that this work of harvest has been going on in the earth for many years, the evidence of this being that there are many groups of believers throughout the world who are better identified by the expression, “the children of the kingdom,” than in any other way. While churchianity in general has turned to the social gospel, the prosperity gospel, community service, and other activities aimed at bettering the world, this little flock of “children of the kingdom” busy themselves in continuing to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom, rejoicing in the realization that the Messianic kingdom in all its power and great glory is near.

JESUS AGAIN THE CHIEF REAPER

Just as Jesus was present at the close of the Jewish Age, and was then the Chief Reaper, so it is now. He was then present in the flesh, but he gave his

flesh for the life of the world, and in his resurrection was exalted to the divine nature. The Scriptures indicate that his Second Presence was to be as a powerful divine being, invisible to human eyes. As the Chief Reaper in the present harvest he has directed the efforts of his people in the flesh as they have gone forth as “angels,” or messengers, to reach those whose ears of understanding have been opened to hear and appreciate the harvest message, the Gospel of the kingdom.

One of the prophecies of our Lord’s Second Presence is recorded in Revelation 14:14: “I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man [the sower of the good seed], having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle.” This is highly symbolic language. Having a “crown” on his head suggests that “the Son of man” returns for the purpose of setting up his long-promised kingdom. Having a sharp sickle in his hand indicates that he is indeed the Chief Reaper in the harvest, which is the end of the age. In verse 15, he is bidden to thrust in the sickle and reap, “for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

As we noted in connection with the Jewish Age harvest, Jesus was the Chief Reaper in the case of both the wheat and the chaff. This, we think, is also true now with respect to the wheat and the tares. The “children of the kingdom” on this side of the veil during the Gospel Age harvest have had, as “reapers,” a supportive role together with the Chief Reaper in the bundling of the tares. This role has been centered in the fact that their preaching of the same Gospel message which has

caused many to come out of the “tare” systems has had the opposite effect on many others. Those who have not had hearing ears and have chosen to remain in those systems have, in a sense, bundled themselves more tightly to them. At the same time, the systems themselves have scoffed at the message of Truth and also bundled themselves closer together, against the Chief Reaper and his fellow reapers. This is all in preparation for the final destruction, or “burning,” of the tare systems to be accomplished not too long hence.

The plans and purposes of God are moving grandly forward. The Scriptures assure us that when all the wheat is gathered into the “barn,” “the children of the kingdom” will “shine forth as the sun” in that wonderful Messianic kingdom of promise, and that through that kingdom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Having this blessed assurance, we need not fear over the increasing chaos and confusion of this present world, whether in religious circles or elsewhere. By faith we rest in the knowledge that the Chief Reaper of this present harvest period will, in his work of preparation, direct all circumstances to a glorious conclusion through the establishment of his kingdom. ■

“Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. Make me go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight.

“So shall I have wherewith to answer him that reproacheth me: for I trust in thy word.”

—Psalm 119:33,35,42