

CHAPTER THREE
"BREAKING DOWN"

(The Apostasy Completed)

"Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God." --Hebrews 3:12

After the first departures from Apostolic authority, it was predictable that a flood-tide of errors would follow. Paul told Timothy, *"Give diligence to present yourself approved unto God, a workman that does not need to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth. But shun profane babblings: for they will proceed further in ungodliness, and their word will spread like a cancer"* (2 Timothy 2:15-17a). He also said, *"Evil men and impostors shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived"* (2 Timothy 3:13).

The "old timers" would say, "It's too late to shut the gate after the horse is gone." Yet, in matters that touch on the eternal destiny of the soul, all "breakaways" from the truth are disastrous. The solution is to go out, round up the horse, get him back in the corral, and then shut the gate more securely. The time for doing this had not yet come, however, in the first few centuries after the Apostles were taken from the scene. Instead, we see a condition like that which followed the death of Joshua and his contemporaries fifteen or more centuries earlier. We are told that *"the people served Jehovah all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of Jehovah that he had wrought for Israel."* After these leaders died, however, *"there arose another generation after them, that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the work which he had wrought for Israel"* (Judges 2:7-10). Therefore, we must devote a little part of this history to show how far the "horse" of error wandered, before any thought was given to recapturing him. The "breakdown" caused by error, we will see, became an avalanche.

It is not feasible, in a short history, to give space to the multitude of these errors, but

we should trace the general descent of our "avalanche" of error through the centuries until the seeds of reform began to germinate. The final chapters of this book will consider some important errors, and how they were corrected. All errors are fundamentally damaging to the security of the believer, yet some errors have a way of troubling believers again and again. We will consider doctrinal errors--especially those concerning the salvation of the sinner. Also we will discuss organizational errors--- including those which obscured the nature and work of the church. In consideration of these errors, we will study the manner in which each of them violates the authority of Scripture. We will also see that all such errors depend for their correction on ardent respect for Scripture.

In the first three centuries of the history of Christianity, tremendous expansion was experienced. There were many obstacles for it to overcome, but it still grew rapidly. One might call this territorial and political spread a success, and there were reasons for it. Schaff writes,

"...In spite of these extraordinary difficulties Christianity made a progress which furnished striking evidence of its divine origin and adaptation to the deeper wants of man.....Nay, the very hindrances became, in the hands of Providence, means of promotion. Persecution led to martyrdom, and martyrdom had not terrors alone, but also attractions, and stimulated the noblest and most unselfish form of ambition.....The moral earnestness of the Christians contrasted powerfully with the prevailing corruption of the age, and while it repelled the frivolous and voluptuous, it could not fail to impress most strongly the deepest and noblest minds. The predilection of the poor and oppressed for the gospel attested its comforting and redeeming power.

"...The chief positive cause of the rapid spread and ultimate triumph of Christianity is to be found in its own intrinsic worth...Its value could be seen in the truth and self-evidencing power of its doctrines; in the purity and sublimity of its precepts; in its regenerating and sanctifying effects on heart and life; in the elevations of woman and of home life over which she presides; in the amelioration of the condition of the poor and suffering; in the faith, the brotherly love, the beneficence, and the triumphant death of its

confessors." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, pp. 15-16.)

While these conditions remained prominent, Christianity was attractive. There were, however, serious problems. We have already noted the infant organizational error of elevating one of the elders in a local church to be a singular Bishop. Of course, the ambition inherent in human nature would not be satisfied with this single promotion. Some Bishops, once exalted above their fellow servants, would crave more and more power, until the Papacy would be firmly in place. The brotherly love that marked the age of the Apostles would fade slowly into the terror and hatred that revealed itself in the dark ages. Discipline of both the clergy and the laity would become severe, often involving torture and death at the hands of dictatorial clerical authority.

CHRISTIANITY BY COUNCIL

Controversies by the dozens would also fracture the believers in the early centuries. To suppress these debates, the hierarchical leadership used the device of regional and international councils to identify and condemn heresies, and to draw the elements of the fractured church into a unit again. From the first general council of Nicea in 325 AD, to the present day, these conclaves have had such a purpose.

The so-called "council" held in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, is cited by many as the scriptural precedent for the great ecumenical councils of the Roman Catholic Church. But the "Jerusalem Council," and those mounted in later times, have some basic differences. The later councils met to debate divisive issues and to formulate creeds and legislate "canons" (church laws) to deal with them, but the Jerusalem meeting made no laws for the church that had not already been made by revelation of God. The Apostle Paul did not go to Jerusalem to learn anything about the subject under discussion. He said, regarding his teaching, *"...It is not after man, for neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ."* Later, in the same context, he said, *"They...who were of repute imparted nothing to me"* (Galatians 1:11-12, 2:2-10). We notice also that he was instructed *"by revelation"* to go up to Jerusalem (no visitor to any of the later councils of the apostate church could say as much). The purpose of the meeting was the correction and discipline of those who came to Antioch from Jerusalem preaching a Judaizing corruption of the truth. They went out from the Jerusalem church, and were

therefore disciplined by the Jerusalem church. Peter said to them, "*Now therefore why make ye trial of God, that ye should put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*" That ended the matter. The autonomy and independence of the involved local churches was maintained. The "epistle" which issued from the meeting, unlike the "canons" of the later apostate councils, carried the authority of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:22-29), so it contained no "doctrines of men."

To give credibility to its actions today, the Roman Catholic Church maintains its right to have occasional ecumenical councils on the basis that the Pope is the "prime" successor to the Apostles, and that the Bishops assembled are also in that line of succession. No precedent for "Apostolic Succession" is found in the Scripture, however. The Apostles laid hands on others to "*impart some spiritual gift,*" but had no right to impart their authority. Their powers had been obtained from Christ, by delegation, and a delegate has no intrinsic right to create another delegate. Jesus selected "The Twelve," personally (John 6:70-71). After the death of Judas, Matthias was not chosen by men, but by divinely controlled "lot" (see Acts 1:15-26, and compare Proverbs 16:33). It was only coincidental that the Apostles viewed him as a valid candidate. But it must be remembered that *two* candidates were put forward, and the Lord chose only one! Before the death of the Apostle James (Acts 12:2), Paul was chosen directly by Christ to be an apostle (see Acts 9:10-16, 1 Corinthians 15:7-9, and Romans 1:1-5). We can find no evidence that the murdered James, nor any other Apostle, ever "laid hands" on Paul. We see from these facts that Apostles were not created by "succession." Therefore, the "bishops" who attended the councils of the apostate church assumed and exercised unlawful "apostolic" authority.

The concept of placing Bishops over territories containing many congregations was unscriptural. As we have seen, in the New Testament there was no distinction between bishops and elders, and these men had no authority or duties, under either designation, outside their local congregation (see Acts 20:17, 28; and 1 Peter 5:1-3).

Such variants in organization set the precedent for variants of other sorts. The "Christianity" that resulted from this is treated by historians as the legitimate heir to Apostolic Christianity. They forget the strong principle enunciated by the inspired New Testament writer, James. In showing the guilt of some who committed the seemingly trivial

sin of showing partiality in their dealings with others, he said, "*For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is become guilty of all*" (James 2:10). The Apostle Paul showed that any deviation from the Gospel brought its promoter and those who adopted it under a curse. To the gullible Galatians, he said, "*I marvel that ye are so quickly removing from him that called you in the grace of Christ unto a different gospel, which is not another gospel, only there are some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema*" (Galatians 1:6-8). If a gospel is "*different*," it cannot be "*another*," Paul says. The only true gospel was the one which the Apostles preached to them. To believe a different gospel is to "*remove from him that called*," and the promoter of the false gospel is "*anathema*" (a curse of destruction).

In this history, therefore, we cannot treat the departures of early Christianity from New Testament authority as *acceptable* and *legitimate*. Despite the retention of good elements in the post-apostolic church, moral and otherwise, we must call its departures "apostate," for we have no other choice. As has already been said, in the "ante-Nicene" period (to 325 AD) there were so many departures that we can make no room to discuss them all in a short history. We do need to consider, however, the forces which brought about these variants and deviations.

PAGAN PHILOSOPHY AND SUPERSTITION

One of the prime sources of perversion came from the heathen tendency to follow philosophy. The spearheads of Christianity had pierced into every corner of the Roman Empire, and even into the forests and deserts peopled by barbarians. Its appeal was strong enough to bring in vast numbers of converts, but who brought with them many of their former beliefs and superstitions. Schaff describes one of these flanking movements of heathenism, calling it "heretical asceticism." Ascetics were "given to strict self-denial, especially for the sake of spiritual or intellectual discipline" (Webster Dictionary). Schaff says,

"The heretical asceticism, the beginnings of which are resisted in the New Testament itself (1 Timothy 4:3; Colossians 2:16 sqq.), meets us in the

Gnostic and Manichaeic sects...It places God and the world at irreconcilable enmity, derives the creation from an inferior being, considers the human body substantially evil, a product of the devil or the demiurge (*Look it up...in a big dictionary!*), and makes it the great moral business of man to rid himself of the same, or gradually to annihilate it, whether by excessive abstinence or by unbridled indulgence...The heathen Gnostic principle of separation from the world and from the body, as a means of self-redemption, after being theoretically exterminated, stole into the church by a back door of practice, directly in face of the Christian doctrine of the high destiny of the body and perfect redemption through Christ." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, pp. 392-393.)

It is impossible to calculate the extent of the damage caused by this clandestine invasion of Gnostic philosophy into early Christianity. It seems to have influenced the thinking of the 4th Century scholar Augustine, whose views on predestination and hereditary sin were based on a strong revulsion against his own inclination to sinfulness (we will have much more to say about this man in a later chapter). The philosophical influence of Gnosticism revealed itself in many unscriptural practices and views (Infant Baptism, the "immaculate conception" of Mary, anti-trinitarianism, Arianism, etc.). It certainly influenced the rise of Monasticism (individuals and groups of men and women who withdrew from the world in varying degrees, and subjected themselves to rigorous work, or abstinence, or silence, or self-punishment, or all of these in combination). Paul foresaw this trend through the eyes of the Holy Spirit, and warned, "*Let no man rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility...If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances, Handle not, nor taste, nor touch (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh*" (Colossians 2:18-23).

Paganism also influenced early Christianity through its idolatry. Jewish revulsion of idols was not shared by the multitude of Gentiles who came into the church. In direct contrast to the warnings of the Apostles against exaltations of men, Schaff says that the veneration

of martyrs led to the veneration of saints and relics.

"In thankful remembrance of the fidelity of this 'noble army of martyrs,' in recognition of the unbroken communion of saints, and in prospect of the resurrection of the body, the church paid to the martyrs, and even to their mortal remains, a veneration, which was in itself well-deserved and altogether natural, but which early exceeded the scriptural limit, and afterwards degenerated into the worship of saints and relics...Martyrdom was taken, after the end of the second century, not only as a higher grade of Christian virtue, but at the same time as a baptism of fire and blood, an ample substitution for the baptism of water, as purifying from sin, and as securing an entrance into heaven." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, pp. 82-83.)

DEVELOPMENT OF POLEMIC THEOLOGY

Yet another devastating influence in early apostate Christianity was the tendency to combat heresy by means that ignored and abandoned the powerful force of the unexpurgated Word of God. Early "apologists" (defenders of the church against heresy and secular opposition) used both their faulty concepts of Scripture, and philosophical polemics to fight this battle. The result was a body of literature that formed the "Sayings of the Fathers," and eventually evolved into "Canon Law" (Church rules and regulations). On this point, Schaff reveals,

"The church possessed the truth from the beginning, in the experience of faith, and in the holy scriptures, which she handed down with scrupulous fidelity from generation to generation. *But now* came the task of developing the substance of the Christian truth in *theoretical form*, fortifying it on all sides, and presenting it in clear light before the understanding. Thus the Christian polemic and dogmatic theology, or the church's logical apprehension of the doctrines of salvation, unfolded itself in this conflict with heresy...

From this time forth the distinction between catholic and heretical, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the faith of the church and dissenting private opinion, became steadily more prominent. Every doctrine which agreed with the holy scriptures and the faith of the church, was received as catholic; that

is, universal, and exclusive. Whatever deviated materially from this standard, every arbitrary notion, framed by this or that individual, every distortion or corruption of the revealed doctrines of Christianity, every departure from the *public sentiment of the church*, was considered heresy." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, pp. 509-510.)

This quotation not only reveals the early distinction that was drawn between "catholicity" and heresy, but also the acceptance of a dual standard of authority: "the revealed doctrines of Christianity" plus "the public sentiment of the church." This distinction was totally in opposition to the teaching of Christ and the Apostles, who said that human traditions and suppositions were forbidden to all who were faithful to the truth (Matthew 15:9, Mark 7:13, Colossians 2:8). Yet, the early apostates went on their oblivious way, forming human creeds, bodies of tradition, and "rules of faith" (summaries of Christian teaching).

THE INFLUENCE OF JUDAISM

Perhaps the most devastating intrusion of error came through the "Judaizers" in the early church. We noted in the previous chapter that the Apostles resisted the doctrine of certain Christian Jews (former Pharisees) requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, in order to be saved. Because of the presence of many Jews in the early church, and because of their status as "the chosen people," the Gentiles would have a natural tendency to defer to their opinions (and they proved to be very opinionated). Their influence was a probable factor in the establishment of the very early practices of infant baptism (as a substitute for circumcision), the "priesthood" (with its mosaic distinctions between clergy and laity), the development of "sacerdotal" functions for the priests, and many other like errors. During this period, if any error carried an overtone of Old Testament authority, we can be reasonably certain that Jewish converts were behind its introduction. Certainly, their thinking governed some of the early aesthetic departures from pure Christianity. One of the sects of this sort was that of the Ebionites. Schaff writes,

"The characteristic marks of Ebionism in all its forms are: degradation of Christianity to the level of Judaism; the principle of the universal and perpetual validity of the Mosaic law; and enmity to the apostle Paul" (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, pp. 432-433.)

In view of Paul's deadly opposition to Judaizing teachers, it is no wonder that such sects would hate that most worthy Apostle, and would resist his divinely ordained struggle to deliver Christianity from the "bondage" of the Law of Moses.

There were perhaps other forces at work to corrupt the truth as revealed by Christ and the Apostles, but these are sufficient to demonstrate that perverse human concepts were slowly infiltrating the church, apostatizing it and damning the souls of its adherents. The trickle of error in the Apostolic Age became a torrent in the Ante-Nicene Age, and it would take many generations before the first feeble reformers would be brushed aside by a tyrannical church, and stronger ones would find the means to succeed against the entrenched and formidable forces of apostasy. Similar forces work today to bring about a new apostasy, but a recognition of how these forces gained ground in the past can equip us to resist them in our own age (a wonderful and profitable benefit of the study of history).