

CHAPTER FOUR
"BREAKING DOWN (2)"

"Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth. But shun profane babblings: for they will proceed further in ungodliness, and their word will eat as doth a gangrene." --2 Timothy 2:15-17a

In the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine I (who lived from about 280 to 337 AD), the church in its apostate form became the recognized "State Church" of the empire. At once, this rise in prestige became an additional temptation to the ambitious bishops of the Nicene version of the church of the Lord. By this time, the church had passed through several degenerative changes. The unscriptural organizational seeds sown in local congregations in the Second Century began now to bear bitter fruit. From those first intra-congregational "presiding bishops" had evolved an expanding system of diocesan and provincial bishops, followed by the elevation of five regional "Patriarchs." Presbyters and evangelists had assumed the position of priests. The single sacrifice of the cross had been voided, theoretically, by the installation of an "altar" and an early form of the ritual called the "sacrifice of the mass." Creeds and "Rules of Faith" had supplanted the Scripture. Monasticism began to displace evangelism.

Yet, this perverted organization still had sufficient moral and spiritual stamina to prove itself superior to the immoral and demonic state of paganism. Schaff says,

"Under a three hundred years' oppression, it had preserved its irrepressible moral vigor, and abundantly earned its new social position. It could not possibly continue a despised sect, a homeless child of the wilderness, but, like its divine founder on the third day of his crucifixion, it must rise again, take the reins of the world into its hands, and, as an all-transforming principle, take state, science, and art to itself, to breathe into them a higher

life and consecrate them to the service of God." (Schaff, History, Vol. 3, p. 92.)

This is an apt description of the power and principles found in the Roman Catholic church, today. It still maintains a vigor that amazes observers, "rising again" after each defeat, and seeming to be almost impregnable to attack. It still thrusts itself into every avenue of human endeavor. It has never repudiated its desire to dominate the state (especially in those nations where its members are in the plurality), though its former dominance has been reduced by wars and revolutions in many places. However, at the time of Constantine's favor, there was still enough respect for Apostolic Tradition to cause much misgiving among its leaders about becoming an official state church.

The new position of the church sent shock waves throughout the world. In the minds of many of its adherents, especially those with memories of the great persecutions under Roman Emperors, the church and the state were incompatible, while those who saw advantage in the arrangement hailed it as a fortunate return to the combination of civil and religious authority seen in the Old Testament (another surrender to Judaism). They were supported in this view by the heathen tradition of letting religion serve the interests of the state. This shows that they did not understand Jesus fully, when he said, "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's*" (Matthew 22:21). Nor did they fully comprehend the instructions of Paul and Peter regarding the divinely appointed function of the state, and the Christian's submission to it (see Romans 13:1-7, and 1 Peter 2:13-17). Christ intended that the church should spread throughout the world, a world with a multitude of governments and political systems, and that it make itself compatible to them, and survive under these systems. The advice of Peter and Paul was not intended to govern Christians only while the church remained "unrecognized." The clear implication of the teaching of the New Testament is that the church should never even seek the recognition of the state! Christians were to continue to submit to secular authority, where it did not contradict the divine (see Acts 5:29). Divine approval would help them thrive under the principle of separation. The unhampered experience of religion in the free environment of the United States, where separation of church and state is firmly implanted, is ample proof of this principle.

The early defenders of the combination of church and state probably found their biblical precedent in a misapprehension of the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, such as Daniel 2:44-45, which promised the "destruction" of worldly kingdoms, and the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God. But the prophets were to be interpreted spiritually, or figuratively, and their prophecies spoke of the victory of God's reign over the hearts of men, not of the domination of secular powers by the church. Jesus confirms this by His testimony, "*My kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:36). The Kingdom of God poses no threat to temporal powers, nor does it "destroy" them, except in the sense that it takes precedence over earthly kingdoms in the hearts of its citizens.

Though Schaff says that the church achieved its new powerful victory over heathenism and the resistance of the state "without a stroke of sword or intrigue" (Vol. 3, p. 92), it is difficult to conceive that there was no political pressure exerted on Constantine by the presence in his empire of such a popular, powerful, and prolific religious body. His actions seem to be dominated by practical politics, and were calculated to win the loyalty of this movement. To add credibility to his recognition of the church, he claimed divine help in the winning of battles, and a dubious legend of royal visions and signs gained acceptance. With the support of the church, he hoped to achieve much more than he could against their passive resistance. His interest in the affairs of the church, even his calling of the great council of Nicea in 325 AD, was for political ends (mainly the suppression of worldwide strife over the theories of Arius). However, unknowingly, he had unleashed a force which would ultimately seek to undermine the rights of the state in later times, and which would develop into a tyrannical state within the state. Kings and Emperors would eventually be enthroned and dethroned through its powers, and the western world would know much bloodshed and desolation because of Constantine's surrender to expediency. Schaff says,

"With the union of the church and the state begins the long and tedious history of their collisions and their mutual struggles for the mastery: the state seeking to subject the church to the empire, the church to subject the state to the hierarchy.....From the time of Constantine, therefore, the history of the church and that of the world in Europe are so closely interwoven, that neither can be understood without the other. On the one hand, the political rulers,

as the highest members and patrons of the church, claimed a right to a share in her government, and interfered in various ways in her external and internal affairs, either to her profit or to her prejudice. On the other hand, the bishops and patriarchs, as the highest dignitaries and officers of the state religion, became involved in all sorts of secular matters and in the intrigues of the Byzantine court. This mutual intermixture, on the whole, was of more injury than benefit to the church, and to religion, and fettered her free and natural development." (Schaff, History, Vol. 3, p. 131.)

None of this could have come about without many years of preparation. The apostate church had inadvertently "adorned herself" as the bride of the state, instead of the "bride of Christ." She had imitated the centralized governmental structure of the Roman Empire, and could easily fit herself into its system. The key factor in her divorce from Christ was her abandonment of scriptural authority. The ease with which this abandonment took place is a source of amazement to many Christian observers today. We might ask, "Could not the early apostates see the consequences of their errors by reading the many scriptural examples showing the evils of despising the Word of God?" Careful students of the Bible should be impressed by the warnings of both Old and New Testament examples. They should recall the sin and fiery destruction of the priests Nadab and Abihu, who *"offered strange fire before Jehovah, which he had not commanded them"* (Leviticus 10:1-2). They can read of the confusion experienced by David because of the death of Uzza, until he realized that they were carrying the Ark of the Covenant in an unscriptural way (1 Chronicles 13 & 15). They are warned against presumptions like that of King Uzziah, who thought his position as King entitled him to enter the Temple and offer incense in the manner of a priest (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). And, they should be made cautious by reading of the mistake of Ananias and Sapphira, who *"lied to the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 5). Jesus had said, *"He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day"* (John 12:48). From this precedent, the Apostle Paul could write, *"If any man teacheth a different doctrine, and consenteth not to sound words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is puffed up, knowing nothing, but doting about*

questionings and disputes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, wranglings of men corrupted in mind and bereft of the truth, supposing that godliness is a way of gain..." (1 Timothy 6:3-5). This description aptly fits the sordid history of the "falling away" predicted by the Apostles.

The Apostles knew that their *delegated* authority had its source in the *inherent* authority of Christ. Paul would say, *If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 14:37). In view of this truth, discipline could be based on whether a man obeyed an apostle's word. Paul said, *"If any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle, note that man, that ye have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed"* (2 Thessalonians 3:14).

But The wranglings of men in the first few centuries after Christ show that they ignored these warnings. There were attempts to draw all men to similar views, but these views did not always coincide with scriptural truth. Ecumenical Councils (first regional, then universal) were used to try to stop the spread of views divergent from "catholic" doctrine. The tragic result of this trend was that Councils often enforced errors, instead of reinforcing truth, and thereby promoted a universal drift toward pyramid type authority (district bishops, then regional, finally universal).

Authority began to reside in the church, not the Bible. Alignment of the church with the state enabled the church to exercise extreme discipline of heretics by execution , and by the use of dreaded "excommunications" (removing a member from the privilege of partaking in the so-called "sacraments" dispensed exclusively through the priests, and which came to be considered as a consignment to the wrath of God).

There was another factor which consolidated the apostasy, sealing it in concrete. Latin was adopted as the language of the Roman Church, and retained long after it ceased to be a universal language. Most copies of the Bible were in Latin. The "Dark Ages" were marked by illiteracy. Only in scholastic circles was Latin prominent (to the advantage of the Roman Church, since uneducated men could seldom dispute what the church said about the Bible.) The church claimed to be the "depository" of truth with the sole right of interpretation.

People in the "Dark Ages" were also victimized by their superstitions and trust in traditions (mystic rituals, veneration of relics, and pseudo-miracles), just as Paul predicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:8-10. Romanism took full advantage of this ignorance, and found many fraudulent ways to increase its wealth through these things.

As we mentioned before, the right to dispense the seven "sacraments," including baptism, communion, marriage, etc., was claimed by the church, and no man who had been excommunicated could enjoy these things, legitimately. In addition, Excommunication from the Church hindered a man's civil activities, since Church and State were bound together. Excommunication, therefore, was a "Sword of Damocles," suspended threateningly over the heads of medieval Catholics.

In every way it could, the Roman Church capitalized on the ignorance of men. Even in the Renaissance of the 12th and 13th centuries, an age of the revival of education and intellectualism, the Roman Church did not swerve from keeping its "Dark Ages" policies. This was a fatal mistake, and fed the flames of religious insurrection throughout Europe.

At the height of its medieval power, the immorality of Popes and Bishops was brazenly displayed (influencing the lower echelons of priests to take them for "role models"). When the "laity" expressed doubt that spiritual functions could be performed legitimately in the hands of corrupt priests, the hierarchy, instead of correcting its moral failures, adopted the self-serving view that the *person* of the priest was separated from his *function*! Under this rule, they could still practice immoralities, while they continued to claim apostolic succession and authority.

Luxury and pride was prominent in the church. Papal opulence was legendary. Monasteries (supposedly dedicated to poverty and chastity) often became luxurious and licentious. Though the church was rich, it remained greedy. It demanded fees for every service (baptisms, weddings, funerals, masses for the dead, etc.) The Pope appointed bishops, and rewarded himself by claiming the new Bishop's income for the first year. Bishop candidates competed for the best "stipends" (incomes), so that Popes often "sold" bishoprics to the highest bidder. Churches often owned the best lands, and rental of these lands added to the Bishops' wealth. In England, thirty per cent of the productive land was in the hands of the Church, arousing great resentment among the people, and igniting the

Peasant Revolt of the 13th Century.

The greedy innovation that finally aroused the 16th Century Reformers to action was the "sale" of indulgences. Indulgences had been a tradition of the apostate church for a long time. It was a complicated doctrine fabricated out of the fantasies of the early apostates. The Catholic could reduce his future time in purgatory, or gain forgiveness of the temporal punishment for sin, by performing various works commanded by the Church, such as being a soldier in a Crusade, or in making gifts toward it. The "selling of indulgence" was not really new, since Popes had sometimes granted special indulgences to wealthy people and princes, *for a fee* (Schaff, History, Vol. 6, p. 93.). In the 16th Century, however, to raise funds for the enlargement of St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican, indulgences were being offered at "bargain prices." This new brand of cheap forgiveness was naturally attractive both to the rich and to the poor. Even the poorest of people were told they could purchase a *large* release from the punishment of their sins with a *small* "coin of the realm." The claim that one could escape the normal consequences of his sins by simply "buying" a document from a priest offended many faithful Catholics, but the Protestant Reformers were much more vigorous in opposition to the abuses connected with it. As the Pope's need for gold grew, abuses also grew, causing some of the priestly salesmen, under pressure from their superiors to produce more cash, to advertise that one could even buy the "right" to commit a damning sin in the *future*. A story is told, whether apocryphal or not, that one Lutheran sympathizer is reported to have taken advantage of such an offer by buying an indulgence, then proceeding with his purchased impunity to beat up the priest who sold it to him.

All of these things about the apostate church, in the ages between the Council of Nicea and the Protestant Reformation, repeatedly offended the sensibilities and consciences of simple folk, and humble men of every order. The situation became intolerable, and dissidents began to show their resentment against an institution which preached righteousness, but practiced unrighteousness. Resistance movements might swell and be crushed for a season, but resistance was the wave of the future, as we will see in the next phase of our brief study.