

THE CHURCH — THEN & TODAY

2,000 YEARS OF CHURCH HISTORY — WHAT HAPPENED?

By Arlen L. Chirwood

During the early years of the Church, attention was focused on *an inheritance in a heavenly land* to which Christians had been called. This was *the central message* proclaimed throughout Christendom during that time.

But today, attention in Christendom — *all Christendom, so-called fundamental and liberal circles alike* — is centered elsewhere; and the true message concerning a heavenly inheritance awaiting Christians is seldom, if ever, heard.

So what brought about the change from the way things were to the way things presently exist? Scripture reveals exactly what happened.

The Way Things Were

The Bible is a book dealing with *redemption*. But the Biblical scope of redemption doesn't stop with man passing "from death unto life" (John 5:24). Rather, it goes on to also include "that which is really life [literal translation]" (I Tim. 6:19). The former has to do with *the gospel of the grace of God*, and the latter has to do with *the gospel of the glory of Christ*. And Scripture, as a whole, concerns itself *far more with the latter than with the former*, for Scripture has been written to the saved, not to the unsaved (I Cor. 2:9-14).

Scripture *begins this way* (the framework set forth in the six and seven days in Genesis chapters one and two [ref. the author's book, THE STUDY OF SCRIPTURE, Chs. II-IV]), necessitating that Scripture *remain this way* (which it does). It is man who has turned the matter around and has not only placed the emphasis at a point where Scripture does not place it but has also either minimized or completely done away with teachings surrounding the point where Scripture does

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place the emphasis.

Note, for example, Paul's dealings with the Church in Ephesus. He spent three years teaching them. But what did he teach them? That's revealed in Acts 20:17-38 when Paul called the elders of this Church together for the last time that he would be with them.

Paul, referring to that which he had previously taught them, began with "the gospel of the grace of God" (v. 24). But he didn't remain there. He then referred to his prior proclamation of "the kingdom of God" (v. 25). And both of these together constituted "all the counsel of God" (v. 27).

God purchased the Church (with the use of "Church" viewed in a complete sense, as in Matt. 16:18) "with his own blood," and the elders in Ephesus were exhorted by Paul to "feed" those in the Church over which they had been placed (v. 28).

(There are manuscript variances in Acts 20:28 relative to whether *Theos* [God], *Kurios* [Lord], or both words together [both *Theos* and *Kurios*] should appear in the text — *i.e.*, God's blood, the Lord's blood [referring to Christ], or the blood of both the Father and His Son.

There is manuscript evidence for each of the three renderings, though most grammarians and translators, who study these things, usually see more evidence for the use of *Theos* [God] alone, with the translation as it appears in the KJV [also in the NASB and NIV]. In the final analysis though it would really be immaterial which of the three manuscript variances was followed, for the Son is God manifested in the flesh.

The time that the paschal lambs were being slain throughout the camp of Israel on the 14th day of the first month of the year in 33 A.D., "in the evening [lit., 'between the evenings,' understood to be between 3 and 6 P.M. (Ex. 12:6)] was the time when the Paschal Lamb was slain. This was the time *when God died*. This was the time *when God purchased the Church with His Own blood*.)

And the elders, called to feed Christians in the Church, which had been purchased by the very blood of God would, of necessity, have to move beyond teachings surrounding the simple gospel of the grace

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of God. Contextually, in this passage, it would have to involve things surrounding "the kingdom of God."

And, in conjunction with that, contextually, it would involve commending them to God and to His Word — that which could *build them up* in "the faith" so they might one day realize the inheritance to which they had been called (v. 32).

Paul, in Acts 20:17ff, exhibited exactly the same qualities which Peter exhibited in his second epistle. Paul had previously spent three years teaching the Christians at Ephesus, and that which he taught them centered around *the Word of the Kingdom*. Then, when he called the elders of this Church together for his last time with them, he still called their attention to teachings surrounding *the Word of the Kingdom*, though these were things that he had spent three previous years teaching them. *This is how important he considered this overall teaching to be*.

And Peter, writing his second epistle and calling attention to this same message, stated that *he was going to always keep these things before the Christians to whom he wrote*, though they had previously been taught these things and were established in these truths. As long as he remained alive *he was going to stir them up by calling these things to their attention* (1:12-18; 3:1, 2; cf. 1:1-11).

Many Christians in the Church today would look upon anyone proclaiming the message surrounding Christ's return after this fashion as "fanatical," or as someone who has "gone to seed on Christ's return." But that's not the way Scripture presents the matter at all.

This was *the central message* Paul (*et al.*) proclaimed, and this was the way that the Holy Spirit moved him to structure his epistles (*et al.* also; *e.g.*, Hebrews-Jude have been structured this same way). Accordingly, this was *a message not only constantly proclaimed but well known and understood throughout Christendom during Paul's day* (Col. 1:5, 6, 23-28).

Note, for example, the Book of Ephesians: As elsewhere throughout the Word of God, there are references in the epistle to the gospel of the grace of God (*e.g.*, 2:8, 9), but almost the entire epistle concerns itself with things surrounding the gospel of the glory of Christ. The epistle concerns itself, in the main, with

that which is stated in Eph. 2:10, giving *the purpose* for man's salvation (vv. 8, 9).

This is what *the inheritance* in chapter one has to do with; this is what *the mystery* revealed to Paul in chapter three has to do with; and the epistle ends with details concerning *the present warfare* against those in the land of our inheritance and how we are to array ourselves for the battle at hand. And between these points, in other parts of the epistle, one will find the same central teaching.

And, in this respect, it's interesting that the Church in Ephesus appears first among the seven Churches in Revelation chapters two and three. The Church in Ephesus sets forth an example of the way that the Church existed at the beginning of the dispensation (knowledgeable about the present spiritual warfare, the Christians' future inheritance, etc.).

But then things began to happen, as seen even in the Church in Ephesus, which left its "first love" (Rev. 2:4).

Then, the Church appears at the end of the dispensation in a completely different setting, a condition resulting from the Church initially leaving its "first love," seen in the seventh and last of the Churches in Revelation chapters two and three, the Church in Laodicea — described as "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:14-21).

That Which Happened

So, What happened? *A woman placed leaven in the three measures of meal.* That's what happened. And Christ stated that the leaven would do its damaging work, "till the whole was leavened" (Matt. 13:33).

This depicts a work by Satan very early in the dispensation. The approximate time when this was done can be known through observing that even during the first few decades of the existence of the Church things were beginning to go awry. The Church in Ephesus had left its "first love" (Rev. 2:4), and false prophets (Christian teachers, elders, proclaiming a message contrary to the Word of the Kingdom — apostates) were beginning to appear in the Churches (II Peter, Jude).

This all occurred within the first forty years

of the Church's existence, and the leaven took the Church down over the next several centuries until the message surrounding the Word of the Kingdom had all but disappeared. By the fourth century A.D., during the days of the Roman Emperors Constantine the Great and Theodosius I, the Church had so *completely lost its true focus that the unthinkable eventually happened. The Church merged with the State.*

In the year 380 A.D., Theodosius I issued an edict that made Christianity *the exclusive state religion*; and by the year 395 A.D., Christianity had become recognized as *the official and only religion of the Roman Empire* — something which could not have occurred apart from almost three centuries of the working of the leaven from within.

The Church, called to inherit *in another land (a heavenly)*, had settled down in the land (an earthly) from which it had been called; the Church, called to rule and reign *in a future kingdom (under Christ)*, had merged with the powers in the present kingdom (under Satan).

A 1,000-year period of darkness then engulfed the Church, awaiting the Reformation under Martin Luther, along with succeeding events.

(For additional information on the preceding, refer to the author's book, MYSTERIES OF THE KINGDOM, Chapters V, VI, "Parable of the Mustard Seed" and "Parable of the Leaven.")

The Reformation itself though had nothing to do with a restoration of truths surrounding the gospel of the glory of Christ. The reformers were concerned centrally with the simple gospel of the grace of God. It was only in later years that men began to look beyond the simple message of salvation by grace through faith — beyond that set forth in Gen. 1:2-5 to that set forth in Gen. 1:6-2:3.

But even then there was no restoration of these truths. There was only a bringing of them to light again, with one Christian here and one Christian there understanding and receiving the truth of the matter.

The leaven had centered its attack at this point, it had done its damaging work, and the only thing which remained was for the leaven to complete its work.

And this is why, when the Son of Man returns for His Church, He will not find "the faith" being

proclaimed by elders in the Churches of the land. *The whole will have been leavened.* Those in the Churches will be talking about *everything but the central message of Scripture.* And the dispensation will end with *the Church — the complete Church — in the condition depicted by the Church in Laodicea.*

The Way Things Are

We're in *the final days* of a dispensation in which the leaven has been working for almost two millenniums. The Church at the end of the dispensation is to be *completely permeated by the leaven, and this has particular reference to the message surrounding the Word of the Kingdom.* This is the message Christ will not find being proclaimed in the Churches at the time of His return.

And, if a person wants to see exactly where we are in relation to that day through *the working of the leaven alone*, all he has to do is go into practically any Church of the land and listen to the message being proclaimed from the pulpit. *He will listen in vain* for any mention of that which is not only the central message which Scripture directs to the saved but also the central message which was proclaimed and understood throughout Christendom during the early years of the Church — *namely that Christians have been purchased by the blood of God for a purpose, to be realized during the Messianic Era, then during the ages beyond.*

Will conditions in Christendom improve? Can matters be turned around?

What does Scripture say? *Scripture is not only the sole Word on the subject but the final Word as well.*

Scripture states that "the whole" *will be leavened*; and Scripture further states that, as a result, the Son of Man is not going to find "the faith" on the earth at the time of His return (Matt. 13:33; Luke 18:8).

So don't look for an end-time revival. It's not coming! Scripture foretells *total apostasy* within the Church instead (*the complete Church standing completely away from "the faith"*). Thus, matters can only get worse.

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