

Why Local Churches Falter – Part 2

INTRODUCTION:

1. Today I want to return to and finish our study of why local churches falter, or weaken and decline, in their stance for the truth.
 - A. This is matter of some importance because the N.T. shows great concern for the spiritual welfare of local churches.
 - i. We see it in Revelation 2-3, where the strengths of local congregations are commended, and their weaknesses and sins are addressed with rebuke, warnings, and corrective instructions.
 - ii. We see it in the words and actions of Paul.
 - a. Acts 15:36, 41 – “After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and **see how they are...**”⁴¹ And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, **strengthening the churches.**”
 - b. In epistles, like 2 Cor. 11:28, where after Paul mentioned the trials and sufferings he had faced as a Christian, he added, “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of **concern for all the churches.**”
 - B. If God is concerned, we should be concerned, especially for our own spiritual state.
- 2. To address this, in the first lesson we consider the first two stages in this process of decline, although the first stage is where all churches should seek to be.
 - A. The first stage of any true church of Christ is that of **spoken understanding of the truth**, seeing a church of Christ cannot come to be apart from the truth being spoken and understood.
 - i. In this stage Christ’s truth is taught with clarity and conviction and understood and lived by those who hear it.
 - ii. Here the truth is appreciated because it is vital to one’s salvation and to the unity of the Spirit demanded by the Lord for His people (Eph. 4:1-5).
 - iii. We saw how in this stage people know that following the truth is what makes the N.T. church different from all other churches, and the truth is the reason for evangelizing.
 - B. Despite good beginnings, churches can and do move to the second stage, which we termed the stage of **unspoken understanding of the truth**.
 - i. In this stage the truth is still believed by most and practiced in general, but the preaching and teaching changes. No longer is the truth that sets the Lord’s church apart from others preached regularly and with conviction.
 - a. For, it is reasoned that the people have “already heard all that” and “they know all that,” and to continue to preach on these topics risks boring the people and creating resentment.
 - b. Yet, more troublesome is when the truth, especially the more controversial subjects that differentiate Christ’s church from man-made ones, are put on the shelf lest we “offend” the newcomers or because “you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”
 - ii. When this stage is entered, before you know it the fullness of truth that reveals the distinctiveness of the Lord’s church and His people has not been preached in years.
 - iii. We closed by showing that there is no N.T. justification for entering this stage seeing the truth is to be preached when people already know it (2 Pet. 1:12-13) and even when they do not want to hear it (2 Tim. 4:1-5).
3. With this in mind, I want to examine the 3rd and 4th stages of decline in a local church.
4. Again, it is not my intention to be negative, but to present what God’s word has to say about the truth and how it relates to the condition of certain churches in hopes of warning and exhorting us unless go down the same path.

BODY:

- **I. Stage 3: Unspoken misunderstanding of the truth:**

- A. When a church enters this stage, it does so because the distinctive truth of the gospel is not being taught and brethren have a fuzzy conception or misconception of what the truth is.
 - 1. Here the truth may still be practiced in worship, work, etc., but is done so simply by default—because it is what the church has always done.
 - 2. In this stage there is little if any concept of how different the Lord’s church is from others.
 - a. Most now see the church of Christ as just another denomination, a church among churches.
 - b. Why, because churches in this stage have spent little time addressing the issues that brethren had to battle, like that of Calvinism, institutionalism, the social gospel, premillennialism, instrumental music in worship, etc.
 - 3. Some brethren and churches believe that this stage is becoming so prevalent among even non-institutional churches that they will no longer schedule preachers for meetings 4-5 years ahead of time because they are unsure what they might get.
 - a. Whether it is as bad as that, I do not know.
 - b. I do know that churches can and do change, often for the worse, and we need to aware of the seriousness of these changes and present the truth as best we can to avoid them.
- B. This stage is entered despite how the Bible warns us against error creeping into the local church and how preaching the truth is the only defense against it.
 - 1. Consider Paul’s exhortations and warnings (Eph. 4:11-16).
 - a. Note first how the revelation and teaching of truth is paramount in God’s plan (4:11-13 – “And He gave some as **apostles**, and some as **prophets**, and some as **evangelists**, and some as **pastors** and **teachers**,¹² for the **equipping of the saints** for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;¹³ until we all attain to the **unity of the faith**, and of the **knowledge of the Son of God**, to a **mature man**, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”).
 - i. God’s plan required, which we also spoke of last week, that the truth be revealed in its fullness by the Spirit through the apostles and prophets of the N.T.
 - ii. God’s plan also includes evangelists, pastors/elders, and teachers to assure that the truth revealed by the apostles is taught to the world and to God’s people.
 - iii. Truth must be taught to:
 - 1) **Equip the saints** for service to Christ, which indicates **truth is needed for proper service** to the Lord. We serve as God reveals, not as we choose.
 - 2) **Build up the body** of Christ. For, true growth is only produced by **truth!**
 - 3) Help all attain to the **unity of the faith**, the fullness of the **knowledge** of Christ, and to the **fullness of spiritual maturity** in Christ. Only the truth does this!
 - b. Secondly, because the truth has been revealed and is to be taught, we are exhorted and warned concerning standing firm in the truth (4:14-16 – “As a result, we are **no longer to be children, tossed** here and there by waves and **carried about by every wind of doctrine**, by the **trickery** of men, by **craftiness** in deceitful scheming;¹⁵ but **speaking the truth in love**, we are to **grow up in all aspects into Him** who is the head, even Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what **every joint supplies**, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”).
 - i. The Spirit **warns** that we must grow in our stance on the truth because false doctrine and devious men will seek to derail our faith.
 - ii. To assure that all remain true, there is to be the **speaking of the truth in love** so all can hear, know, and do their part to assure faithfulness to the doctrine and proper growth in Christ!

- 2. Paul’s warning to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:28-32 – “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure **savage wolves will come in among you**, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from **among your own selves men will arise**, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day **for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one** with tears. ³² And now I **commend** you to **God** and to the **word of His grace**, which is able to **build you up** and to **give you the inheritance** among all those who are sanctified.”).
 - a. Paul warns these elders to be on guard because “**savage wolves**,” which is how he describes **false teachers**, can/will arise or come in and destroy the sheep, leading them astray.
 - b. This diligence necessitates their continual devotion to “**God** and to the **word** of His grace” because only it can “build you up” and ‘give you the inheritance” of the sanctified.
 - c. It is only right to mention that part of remaining in truth is **maintaining one’s love and zeal for God**, which John warns had apparently left these brethren—they had lost their first love (Rev. 2:4).
- 3. Peter’s warning to his readers (2 Pet. 3:15-17 – “and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, ¹⁶ as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the **untaught** and unstable **distort**, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, **to their own destruction**. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, **be on your guard** so that you are **not carried away by the error** of unprincipled men and **fall from your own steadfastness**, ¹⁸ but **grow** in the **grace** and **knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”).
 - a. If the truth is not loved and taught, the **untaught** will distort the truth and be **led away into error** and **destruction**. Knowing the truth is a serious matter!
 - b. There must be a continual effort to present the truth so all might **grow in the grace and knowledge** of Christ needed for our salvation.
- 4. So, a church entering this stage does so in contradiction to the many warnings of the Scriptures and by doing so sets themselves up for the final step in their decline.

● II. Spoken misunderstanding of the truth

- A. When a church reaches this stage, it ceases to hold to the truth and instead embraces, preaches, and practices error.
 - 1. Its doctrine has lost the distinctiveness of truth and the error of the religious world is embraced and commended.
 - 2. With this final step that local church has truly become just one church among many.
 - 3. I have seen this happen in churches and individuals that were once faithful to the truth. So, we need to be aware of it and do what we can to assure we do not go down this path.
- B. Bible warns us about where error leads, and it never leads you to God or salvation.
 - 1. Jesus warned about the blind following the blind (Matt. 15:14 – “Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”).
 - 2. Peter warned that false teaching leads to destruction (2 Pet. 2:1-3 – “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there **will also be false teachers among you**, who will secretly introduce **destructive heresies**, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. ² **Many will follow their sensuality**, and because of them the way of **the truth will be maligned**; ³ and in their greed they will **exploit you with false words**; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and **their destruction is not asleep**.”)

- 3. The truth must be lived and preached to assure salvation (1 Tim. 4:16 – “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.”).
- 4. Two sobering warnings:
 - a. Peter warns of those who come with false words that lead people back into the bondage of sin, leaving them worse off than before (2 Pet. 2:17-22 – “These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. ¹⁸ For **speaking out arrogant words of vanity** they **entice** by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who **barely escape** from the ones who live in error, ¹⁹ **promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption**; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. ²⁰ For if, after they have **escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord** and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the **last state has become worse for them than the first**. ²¹ For it would be **better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them**. ²² It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A **dog returns to its own vomit**,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.”).
 - b. The second is 2 Thess. 1:7-9 where Paul speaks of when “the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in **flaming fire**, ⁸ **dealing out retribution** to those who do not know God and to **those who do not obey the gospel** of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ **These** will pay the penalty of **eternal destruction**, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”
 - c. These are truly sobering warnings to me and to you that the truth must be **preached, believed, and practiced** if we hope to gain an eternal home in heaven.

CONCLUSION:

1. I hope I have...
 - A. Impressed upon you the importance of truth being taught and obeyed within the local church and our lives.
 - B. Sufficiently presented the warnings that God has given us in the Scriptures to help us avoid entering into these stages of decline and spiritual ruin.
2. For, as Paul said to the Ephesian elders, my goal is to “**commend you to God** and to the **word of His grace**, which is able to **build you up** and to **give you the inheritance** among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).
3. If you are not a Christian, the truth calls upon you to trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, confess your faith in Him, to repent of your sins, and to be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins so that you can arise from baptism and serve God with the hope of eternal life.