

## Why Local Churches Falter

### INTRODUCTION:

1. When I talk to various people who travel around and visit other churches, I find that...
  - A. People are concerned about the spiritual state of local churches of Christ.
  - B. People perceive that some of these local churches are changing.
    - i. Granted, some change for the *good*, growing stronger through sound leadership, teaching, etc.
    - ii. Others, however, that were once strong in the faith have grown weaker and seem to have faltered, if you will, in areas of truth and morality.
    - iii. Of course, I understand that some see this faltering everywhere and criticize most every church, sermon, and bible class lesson. I am not one of those!
  - C. Yet, that local churches weaken, or waver is real, maybe more so than we know or like to admit, which is unsettling for those who care about the Lord, about the truth, and about their brethren.
2. This concern for local churches is not new. In 2 Cor. 11 Paul mentions all he suffered as a Christian, and adds to that his daily **concern for the churches** (2 Cor. 11:28-29 – “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of **concern for all the churches**.<sup>29</sup> Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my **intense concern**?”).
  - A. When you read through the epistles and Revelation you see how these addressed the *strengths* and *weaknesses* of churches like Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, Sardis, etc. And some of their weaknesses were threatening their faithfulness to Christ.
  - B. And, you also read of many *influences* on these churches that are warned against, influences that would lead these churches away from the truth and into error.
3. So why does the N.T. expend so much time and effort exhorting brethren to remain in the truth while also warning them against false teaching, or error? Because brethren and churches can weaken, falter, fall away from the truth, and be **lost**.
4. Since God is concerned about this, we need to be concerned about it as well.
  - A. I would like to look at how every local church in every generation faces the challenge of remaining faithful to the truth.
  - B. To do this I want to examine the stages a local church can go through that if unchecked will eventually lead it away from the truth and do great spiritual damage.
  - C. I do this so that we will be aware of it and guard against it.

### BODY:

- **I. Stage 1: Spoken understanding of the truth:**
- A. Here the truth is taught in the local church with clarity and conviction, and it is understood by the brethren, seeing that is the only means by which a congregation of the Lord can start.
- B. Here the truth is...
  - 1. *Valued* because it is known to be *vital* to salvation (John 8:31-32 – “So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in **My word**, then you are truly disciples of Mine;<sup>32</sup> and you will know **the truth**, and **the truth will make you free**.”).
  - 2. Understood to be what *distinguishes the Lord’s church* from denominational and sectarian churches.
    - a. Roy Cogdill made an astute observation (**New Testament Church**, 1950’s): “The Churches of Christ have steadily progressed in spite of ridicule and opposition until they have reached a plane of dignity and respectability in the world. They are now confronted with the danger of accepting their place among the religious bodies of the world and becoming merely ANOTHER DENOMINATION. It is quite commonly a subject of discussion that there is but little difference between the Church of Christ and other religious bodies. The purpose, prayer and aim in the preparation and development of these lessons has been to make the **distinctive position** occupied by the Church of Christ

**outstanding** and **easily discernible**. Members, both young and old, need to know the difference between the Church and denominationalism. Indoctrination along this line is imperative if the members of the Churches of Christ are to remain “a people for God’s own possession.”

b. That is so very true!

- 3. Why we must evangelize—tell the truth to others—knowing salvation only come through believing the truth (2 Thess. 2:13 – “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for **salvation** through sanctification by the Spirit and **faith in the truth.**”).
- C. Here people are taught and appreciate the oneness of unity in the truth (Eph. 4:1-5 – “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, <sup>3</sup> being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”).
- 1. **The** unity of the Spirit (only one) is sought and preserved through the character traits of humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance/forbearance, and love (4:1-3).
- 2. Understood that the *UNITY of the Spirit* means that *denominationalism*, or accepted division among churches, is contrary to God’s will.
- 3. This unity of the Spirit is based on the **oneness** of the truth:
  - a. **One body**—that body is the church (Col. 1:24). So, there is one church which Jesus built and owns (Matt. 16:18). If one is not part of Christ’s body/church, one is not Christ’s!
  - b. **One Spirit**—the revealer of God’s complete truth through the apostles (Jn. 16:13 – “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into **all the truth**; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.”).
    - i. From this it is taught/understood that if a church claims to receive additional truth today, they are not Christ’s church. The apostles revealed all the truth in the N.T.
    - ii. From this it is known that if a church claims the Spirit guides them but teaches/practices things different than what the apostles said, it is not following the Spirit and does not practice the truth.
  - c. **One hope**—that hope is Jesus and the grace found in him (Jn. 14:16 – “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; **no one comes to the Father but through Me.**”).
    - i. In this stage Christians are taught and understand that if you are not following Christ, not His disciple, you are not going to heaven—you are lost.
    - ii. And, it matters that people are lost outside the truth.
  - d. **One Lord**—Jesus is that Lord. For, Eph. 1:20-23 says that God has “raised Him from the dead and **seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,** <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup> And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as **head over all things to the church,** <sup>23</sup> which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”
    - i. Here the truth is preached and understood that Jesus rules supreme **today**, sitting on God’s throne as king and having *all things in subjection under his feet* and being *head over all things to the church*.

- ii. It is taught and understood that there is **no place for human lords** that set doctrine and practice for the churches, as does the Pope of Catholicism or the councils, synods, and conventions of denominationalism.
  - e. **One faith** – the faith revealed in the scriptures, which faithful Christians and churches seek out and follow (Jude 3 – “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for **the faith** which was **once for all** handed down to the saints.”).
    - i. It is taught/understood that though the religious world may accept many faiths, believing all such faiths lead to heaven, it simply is not so—it is false doctrine.
    - ii. The only saving faith in the **one faith revealed in Scripture!**
  - f. **One baptism** – baptism in water for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 10:47; 22:16), baptism to be saved (1 Pet. 3:21), baptism to enter Christ and to be buried and raised with Him (Rom. 6:3-4)!
    - i. It is taught and understood that this is the only baptism commanded for people to submit to, to obey—the baptism of the Great Commission!
    - ii. People hear/understand that baptism for any other reasons, even if it is immersion, is not saving baptism—does not wash away sins—does not bring one into Christ—and is not according to the truth!
- 4. In addition to this, the truth of only **one acceptable worship** is preached and understood.
  - a. This is a worship of like beings (John 4:24 – “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”). From this we learn that...
    - i. Only a God-like person can have fellowship with God and truly worship Him. In other words, God accepts worship from *Christians*, those who by hearing the truth come to faith in Christ that is strong enough to obey by repenting of sin, confessing Christ, and being baptized to enter Christ and be forgiven of their sins and saved.
    - ii. God accepts worship that is according to His will—worship revealed by the Spirit in the word—worship that is **in truth!**
      - 1) False teaching makes one’s worship vain (Mt. 15:8-9 – “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. <sup>9</sup> ‘But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”).
      - 2) God requires that the words and actions of worship be done in accordance with Christ’s authority, His name (Col. 3:17 – “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”).
- 5. So, in this stage, preachers are preaching the truth, elders are leading in truth, teacher are teaching the truth, and brethren know the truth and are living it and spreading it.

● **II. Stage 2: Unspoken understanding of the truth.**

- A. In this state the truth is still *believed* in the local church, but the preaching and teaching begin to change, to go in a different direction.
  - 1. The distinctive message of truth is no longer being preached and taught as it once was...
    - a. **Because** it is not needed. Everybody has heard it all, knows it, and is practicing it.
    - b. **Because** if you keep preaching it, you risk people growing bored with the truth and no longer listening.
      - i. I get how this happens, seeing it is difficult to know when and how often to preach on certain matters of truth, especially the sensitive and difficult ones.
      - ii. But God’s wisdom and our experience tell us not to stop. Instead, both need to be preached consistently!
  - c. **Because** those who once preached the truth shy away from it because “you draw more flies with honey than vinegar” and controversial subjects and dogmatism tend to *offend*.

- i. People justify this by convincing themselves that there are more pressing matters that need to be addressed to get new Christians grounded in Christ.
    - ii. People justify this by claiming that the foundation of truth has already been laid, so there time to get to these subjects in the future. The need is not pressing at that time.
  - 2. So, what happens is that weeks turn into months, which turn into years.
    - a. And before you know it, the distinctive message of the truth about the church’s organization, worship, work, doctrine of salvation, purity, morality, etc., have not been taught for years!
    - b. So, the truth that was assumed to be known and understood is no longer presented as truth that should be known and understood by the local church—which is problematic.
- B. God says teaching the truth is **important**:
  - 1. Jesus’ prayer (John 17:17-21 – “Sanctify them in **the truth**; Your **word is truth**.<sup>18</sup> As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.<sup>19</sup> For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be **sanctified in truth**.<sup>20</sup> “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who **believe in Me through their word**;<sup>21</sup> that they may all be **one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You**, that they also may be in Us, so **that the world may believe that You sent Me**.”).
    - a. Our sanctification depends on truth being preached and understood (17:17-19).
    - b. The unity God demands today is to be the same as that of Jesus and the Father, a unity of love, doctrine, and practice (17:20-21).
      - i. Jesus did not preach a different doctrine than the Father (Jn. 14:24 – “He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me.”).
      - ii. Jesus did not practice something different from the Father (Jn. 5:19 – “Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.”)
      - iii. So, the unity we are to have is to be one of God’s love, of God’s doctrine, and of doing what God has revealed in the Scriptures.
    - c. Why is this unity important? Without it the world will not believe God sent Jesus!
  - 2. The truth, even the unpleasant truth, must be continually preached...
    - a. Even when **people already know it** (2 Pet. 1:12-13 – “Therefore, I will always be ready to **remind** you of these things, **even though you already know them**, and **have been established in the truth** which is present with you.<sup>13</sup> I consider it **right**, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, **to stir you up by way of reminder**.”).
      - i. Peter knew his readers knew, but that did not stop him from reminding them!
      - ii. Peter says it is **right** to remind us, so we will not forget it and wander from it.
    - b. Even when **people do not want to hear it** (2 Tim. 4:1-5 – “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: <sup>2</sup> **preach the word**; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.<sup>3</sup> For **the time will come** when they **will not endure sound doctrine**; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves **teachers in accordance to their own desires**,<sup>4</sup> and will **turn away their ears from the truth** and will turn aside to myths.<sup>5</sup> But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, **do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry**.”)
      - i. He did not tell Timothy he could relax because people know the truth.
      - ii. He said to preach the truth “in and out of season,” or when people want it or do not, when it is convenient or it is not, when they like it and when they do not!

- iii. It is important to do this because being lax in preaching the truth will...
  - 1) Allow time for people's hearts to become hardened to sound doctrine and they will seek out teachers who will tell them what they want to hear!
  - 2) A preacher is not doing the work of an evangelist, the work of his ministry.
3. There is no justification within God's word for a local church entering the stage of "unspoken understanding" of the truth. The truth must always be spoken so that all may continue to know it, understand it, appreciate it, and live it.

CONCLUSION:

1. We will end here and pick up next time with the third stage, if you will, in the decline of a local church and what we need to know about that.
2. Of course, I am not intending to be negative in all this but trying instead to emphasize what God has told us to do to avoid falling into this downward spiral of decline.
3. And I hope I have done that and helped you see the importance of preaching the whole truth, even those subjects that are difficult, uncomfortable, or that may seem meticulous and boring to some.
4. The truth calls on you to hear, to consider, and to respond. Will you respond correctly to the truth of Jesus' sacrifice for you and trust in him as your Savior, R-C-B-LF?