

Four Tragic Shifts In The Visible Church 180-400 A. D.

by Jon Zens

Most professing Christians do not realize that the central concepts and practices associated with what we call 'church' are not rooted in the New Testament, but in patterns established in the post-apostolic age. While there are a legion of disagreements among serious students of church history concerning various issues and details during the period of 50 A.D. to 325 A.D., they all speak as one voice in affirming the four undeniable shifts that will be examined in this article. Church historians of all theological and ecclesiastical backgrounds observe in their writings the following four shifts:

1. The church portrayed in the New Testament was a dynamic organism, a living body with many parts. The church from around 180 A.D. onwards became an increasingly hardened institution with a fixed and complex hierarchy.
2. The early church was marked by; the manifestation of a polyform ministry by which edification and the meeting of needs were accomplished through the gifts of all the brethren. The post-apostolic church moved more and more toward a uniform conception of church offices which separated ministry from the 'laity' and limited significant ministry to the 'clergy'.
3. The church of the first and most of the second centuries was characterized by cycles of intense difficulty and persecution - it was a suffering body. With the advent of Constantine the church became protected, favored and ultimately sanctioned as the state religion by the Roman state, and thus became an institution at ease.
4. In the New Testament the church, with no small measure of vulnerability, depended on the Holy Spirit to hold the brethren together and to lead them in ministry. Later, the church trusted in itself as a very powerful institution, along with its many rules, rites and offices to secure visible unity among its adherents.

These four shifts are indisputable. They did not come about in a day. They were the result of many factors working together as time elapsed. There are many implications to ponder in light of these significant changes that occurred. I would like to explore each of these shifts in order to highlight certain key issues that each of us needs to face.

We claim to take Christ's revelation about the church in the New Testament seriously, yet the reality is that too often we are more attached to the 'received order' which is based on human traditions. What does it mean to be faithful to the New Testament's teaching about the church? In what sense are the examples of the church life 'binding' on us?

For instance, some assert that since the early church met primarily in homes, we are obliged to emulate this example. I think the primary theological point of the New

Testament in this regard is that under the New Covenant there are no holy places. Contemporary Christianity has almost no grasp of this significant point. Taking the cue from the Old Covenant, people are still led to believe that a church building is 'the house of God'. Believers are free to meet, anywhere in which they can foster, cultivate and attain the goals set before them by Christ. The problem today is that many church structures neither promote nor accomplish Christ's desires for His body. Homes are a natural place for believers to meet, and the early church flourished well into the first and second centuries without erecting any temple-like edifices. In places around the world where persecution reigns, house-church movements have flourished. Someday in America, if our religious infrastructure falls as a result of economic and political turmoil, true believers will be forced to meet outside of traditional church buildings. But the issue still is not what type of place believers gather, but what shape their committed life together takes as they wrestle with the many duties and privileges flowing out of the priesthood of all believers.

I believe that it is far more important to capture the spirit of church life as we see it unfolded in the New Testament, than it is to try and woodenly replicate cultural particulars of the first century. We do not live in the first century, but the concepts and principles in the New Testament endure and will come to expression in any culture. The four tragic shifts about to be examined will give us all plenty to reflect and act upon as we seek to take our discipleship earnestly. Christians must take their stand and devote their precious energies to building up the body of Christ in ways that return to the original patterns of the New Testament.

1 The Shift From the Body of Christ as a Dynamic Organism to a Settled Institution

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul goes into some detail concerning the implications of the church being a living organism, a body with many parts. In the early chapters of Acts we see a vibrant, caring, sharing and witnessing body of believers created by the power of the Spirit who was poured out by the risen Christ. This corporate 'new man' created by Jesus was not without leadership and organization, but there is no evidence of desire by the leaders to create a tightly-knit religious institution, with an elaborate hierarchy and intricate chain-of-command. The leaders above all were to be servants to feed and build up the flock; the organization that came to expression was for the purpose of meeting people's needs, not to create a religious bureaucracy.

The church Christ purposed to build is always described in terms of 'koinonia', a common sharing of life together in the bonds of Jesus Christ. However, the reality is that as time went on after the apostles' death, the church gravitated increasingly toward finding its essential definition, not in a dynamic organism, but in a visible institution with a hierarchy of officers. The church came to be no longer identified as a body of believers bonded by love as members one of another, but as a religious organization whose officers gave it significance. Ultimately it was asserted that without the officers, there was no church. Organization usurped vital life as the hallmark of the church.

This legacy still remains with us today. The needs of people are subordinated to the maintenance of religious bureaucracy. Patterns of church government often have nothing to do with the ethos of the New Testament. Many define the 'true' church in terms of

outward marks such as "the proper preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and practice of discipline". But these characteristics have been outwardly present in dead churches. The New Testament defines the church dynamically in terms of functioning together as a body. If church was defined, for example, in the organic terminology of Acts 2:42-47, how many churches would you find? Why is it that even today when somebody asks "What church do you attend?"; the next query after you tell them is usually, "Who is the pastor there?" We still tend to define church in terms of leadership instead of by loving relationships among the brethren.

2 The Shift From Polyform Ministry to Uniform Ministry

In the early church ministry was conceived of in terms of Ephesians 4:16, "From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Ministry was seen as committed to the whole body by Christ its Lord. As Paul put it, "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many ... As it is, there are many parts, but one body" (1 Cor. 12:14,20). To every person in the body of Christ is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the benefit of all (1 Cor. 12:7). Universal giftedness in the church, which is secured by the resurrected Christ leading captivity captive (Eph. 4:7-8), included such important leadership gifts as apostles and administration.

The great tragedy is that from about 180 A. D. onwards the increasingly institutionalized church began to assign ministry more and more to the officers (the "clergy"), and less and less to the common people (the "laity"). George W. Forell astutely summarizes the shift from body-ministry to bishop-ministry:

Ethical guidance for people recently converted to Christianity and likely to bring a pervasive pagan attitude to his new life was offered at first by a polyform ministry of grace, reflected in the New Testament. But, as time went by, moral authority was increasingly focused on an ordered ministry of bishops and deacons ...The institution most effective in containing the threats to the unity of the nascent Christian movement was the gradually evolving office of the bishop ...Through the office of the bishop the shape of the Christian life is determined and the masses recently brought into the Christian movement are conformed to Christ.¹

No emphasis on one person who occupies the office of bishop (pastor) can be found in the New Testament. While it certainly contemplates a plurality of leaders as part of life in Christ's body, the overwhelming emphasis falls upon exhortations that involve all the members of the body. At least 58 times in the New Testament believers are commanded to fulfill responsibilities relating to "one another". We have turned the tables and viewed ministry as essentially resting upon "the minister", and forgotten that ministry as unfolded in the New Testament is spread around to everyone.

If ministry is not seen as focused in one office in the New Testament, where was precedent for a separate caste found? It was found in the exclusive priesthood under the Old Covenant. William Bausch observes:

Our survey has shown us that no cultic priesthood is to be found in the New Testament. Yet we wound up importing Old Testament Levitical forms and imposing them on Christian ministry.²

The negative implications that arose from the shift from polyform to uniform ministry are myriad. The mutual care so basic to the fabric of early church life was virtually lost. Why? Because mutuality - "you are all brethren" - was buried underneath the superstructure of institutionalized officers. William Bausch crystallizes this point by saying,

Nevertheless in practice there is no denying that there has historically been a gathering into one person and his office what were formerly the gifts of many. ...[This practice] goes astray, of course, when it translates to mean that only ordination gives competence, authority, and the right of professional governance. It goes further astray when eventually all jurisdictional and administrative powers in the church come to be seen as an extension of the sacramental powers conferred at ordination. In short, there is a movement here away from the more pristine collaborative and mutual ministries of the New Testament.³

We must face the fact that the traditions regarding church government and order which we have inherited are cast in very suspicious garb. They are clergy-centered and generally stifle and suppress the "one another" perspectives of the New Testament. Servant leadership should be a natural part of body-life by which the people of God are encouraged toward, facilitated in and equipped for various ministries. Unfortunately, however, the shift from polyform to uniform ministry has created the deplorable situation in which the church forever remains as a dependent, helpless, non-maturing infant for the sake of the officers who watch over the crib. We have inherited traditions in which the tail wags the dog. It is my conviction that because of the deep-seated nature of this awful shift in perspective, the greatest practical need facing the church today is the reincarnation of "a polyform ministry of grace".

3 The Shift from a Suffering Church to an Institution of Ease

The early church grew and prospered incredibly without having church buildings or being protected by the state. In fact, from apostolic times to the ascension of Constantine the church went through cycles of intense persecution spearheaded by the ruling powers. These times of persecution are well documented in such books as *Persecution in the Early Church* by H. B. Workman and *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* by W. H. C. Friend.⁵

However, the advent of the emperor Constantine in 312 A.D. brought great changes, most of them for the worse. Money from state funds was used to erect Christian church buildings and support Christian clergy. Ultimately, Christianity was declared to be the state religion. From Constantine onwards the visible church became enmeshed in political intrigue, and the state mingled in the determination of church affairs. As Louis Berkhof notes regarding the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. [which Constantine convened and presided over]:

A settlement forced upon the Church by the strong hand of the emperor could not satisfy and was also of uncertain duration. It made the determination of the Christian faith dependent on imperial caprice and even on court intrigues. ...The sequel clearly probed that, as it was, a change in emperor, and altered mood, or even a bribe, might alter the whole aspect of the controversy. This is exactly what happened repeatedly in subsequent history.⁶

Constantine set in motion the ideal of a territorial state religion with Christianity at the helm. This ideal was the death knell of all that the Gospel stood for. It signaled the end of believers gathering separately from the pagan culture as a counter-culture where the way of Christ was displayed in simplicity. Now the church was conceived of as all the people in a nation who were born as citizens of the state and constituted as part of the visible church by infant baptism. Church and politics were fused together, creating immense confusion. Ron VanOverloop notes this phenomenon operation from the post-apostolic church to the Reformation:

As was the case in the early church when emperors called the great ecumenical councils together, so was the progress of the Reformation to a great extent determined by the political maneuvering taking place in each country.⁷

In the early church the disciples banded together in homes and other places as communities "called out" from the world; but Constantinianism erased this distinction and defined "church" as all citizens in a given territory. This had the practical effect of watering down true discipleship and creating a worthless nominal Christianity. Werner Elert contrasts the early days with the rise of Constantinianism:

[In the early church] the strength of their ties with one another is matched by the strength of the boundary they draw to the outside. In business dealings with one another they do not choose an unbeliever to arbitrate; they transact their business "before the saints" and between "brother and brother" (1 Cor. 6:1.5). One is to throw in one's lot with those who fear the Lord, consider their common good, and daily visit the saints face to face ...After Constantine things changed radically with the influx of the masses. This did not prosper the Christian brotherhood. If we can believe only half of what Salvian says, there was not much left of it a hundred years later in many parts of western Christendom.⁸

The shift from a suffering church to an institution sanctioned and promoted by the state forces us to face a crucial question: Was the Constantinian change the rise or fall of the church? How you answer that question will greatly define your whole view of the church and its mission. In light of New Testament revelation about the church Christ purposed to build, I submit that Constantinianism was a wretched stone thrown into the sea of church history, the ripples of which still lap on our shores today.

We must make a choice. Are we going to cast our lot in with the New Testament vision for the body of Christ [simplicity, suffering, servanthood], or in with the Constantinian model [powerful institution, clergy dominance, rule by political maneuvering]? Are we going to devote the energies of our short life-span to perpetuating the post-apostolic shifts that moved away from the simplicity of Christ, or to restoring the spirit of the New Testament vision?

4 The Shift from a Spirit-Dependent Church to a Letter-Dependent Institution

Twice in his epistles Paul refers to the fact that the church serves Christ "in [the] newness of the Spirit and not in [the] oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6). The church was a community of the Spirit from the Day of Pentecost. In light of this reality the early church did not trust in fixed forms to maintain and guard her existence. There was an openness of the body to be led by the Spirit in light of Christ's Gospel-word.

This can be seen, for example, in the glimpse of an early church service revealed in 1 Cor. 14. Edification was the goal which was to be reached by the Spirit-led participation of the body. The balance Paul desired can perhaps be summed up like this: no form of order in the service must be allowed to stifle the free expression of edifying gifts in the body; no expression of spontaneity in the body must be allowed to blossom into unprofitable disorder. William Barclay isolates these important points from 1 Cor. 14:

[Paul] is determined that anyone who possesses a gift should receive every chance to exercise that gift, but he is equally determined that the services of the Church should not thereby become a kind of competitive disorder. ...There must be liberty but there must be no disorder. ...There was obviously a freedom and an informality about [this service] which is completely strange to our ideas. ...Clearly the church had no professional ministry. ...It was open to anyone who had a gift to use that gift. ...There was obviously a flexibility about the order of service in the early church which is now totally lacking. There was clearly no settled order at all. Everything was informal enough to allow any man who felt that he had a message ...to give it. ...The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and the obligation of contribution something to it.⁹

Unfortunately, as time went on this Spirit-dependence gave way to more and more fixed forms of worship, which phased out body participation and committed ministry only to an ever-growing web of ecclesiastical hierarchy. By 250 A.D. church order was set in concrete with one bishop ruling over various territories. The momentum of this church bureaucracy was accelerated when Constantine and his successors sanctioned the church and contributed moneys and resources to this increasingly powerful institution. What began as a Spirit-led organism ended up as a letter-dependent institution. The leaders no longer trusted in the Spirit to hold the body together; instead they leaned on intricate human contrivances and rules to feign outward unity.

One of the saddest features of this shift to letter-dependence, combined with the church's new collusion with the state, was the employment of coercion both to gain and maintain adherents. Simply trusting in the Spirit would have resulted in a spiritual reality too vulnerable to be controlled by human contrivances; the use of raw power backed by the weapons of the state seemed to promise greater stability. Eric Hoffer makes this tragic observation which church history, unfortunately, verifies:

There is hardly an example of a mass movement achieving vast proportions and a durable organization solely by persuasion ...It was the temporal sword that made Christianity a world religion. Conquest and conversion went hand in hand. ...Where Christianity failed to gain or retain the backing of state power, it achieved neither a wide nor permanent

hold. ...It also seems that, where a mass movement can either persuade or coerce, it usually chooses the latter. Persuasion is clumsy and its results uncertain.¹⁰

Again we must ask ourselves, "Are we going to be a part of perpetuating this shift to trusting in outward carnal hedges to hold the church together, or are we going to purpose to contribute to a return of child-like trust in the Spirit of Christ to build and sustain His body?"

Concluding Remarks...

We have examined four clear shifts in early church history. These shifts are acknowledged by church historians of all theological persuasions. James D. G. Dunn, one of the foremost New Testament scholars of our time, summarizes the essence of these four shifts like this:

Increasing institutionalism is the clearest mark of early Catholicism - when church becomes increasingly identified with institution, when authority becomes increasingly coterminous with office, when a basic distinction between clergy and laity becomes increasingly self-evident, when grace becomes increasingly narrowed to well-defined ritual acts. We saw above that such features were absent from first generation Christianity, though in the second generation the picture was beginning to change.¹¹

'Such features were absent from first generation Christianity,' that is, they are not found in the New Testament. Does this concern you? Is your heart burdened by the chasm between the original work of the Spirit and the hardened institution that quickly emerged in the post-apostolic days? Does it bother you that most of what we associate with 'church' has little to do with the New Testament, and more to do with patterns that reflect a drift away from it?

Further, and this is the key question, were the shifts we have studied a faithful extension of New Testament ideals, or a tacit denial of all that they stand for? If the answer is the latter, then it is incumbent upon believers to work for the recovery of Christ's ways and to stop contributing to the perpetuation of non-edifying ecclesiastical patterns.

The following articles contain excerpts from various sources relating to early church history. I commend my thoughts on the four shifts and the upcoming collaborating materials to your discerning conscience. May the Lord guide you into appropriate responses as 'the worthy walk' is set before us in the Gospel.

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