

"Is It Growth or Apostasy?"

by Cled E. Wallace

This is the story as it was told to me. A successful businessman and his wife were driving through the state. She observed and made some remarks about some nice meetinghouses under construction. Some of them were for the use of churches of Christ. She asked her husband why these people appeared to be enjoying a steady growth. His answer was that they are still exercising some evangelistic fervor but indicated that he thought they would get over it in time. Religious movements display a large amount of zeal in their youth, press their claims with fervor and fight hard for recognition. They grow up, ardor cools and the original convictions that started them rolling are diluted. They become institutionalized and depend more on that than they do individual zeal and personal consecration. Popularity and respectability bring in large numbers of adherents who know little and care less about original principles and aims.

What individuals and congregations formerly took care of is now routine work for institutions who look after it for everybody. Individuals and congregations toss in a little money, and it requires little sacrifice if the field has been thoroughly propagandized by a trained headquarters, boast about their institutions, relax and go to sleep with a good conscience. The emphasis is more and more on money and less and less on the strict standards of doctrinal conviction and personal devotion. People being what they are it is a comfortable feeling to make a comfortable contribution and let the institution do it. What is the result? The movement acquires definite denominational characteristics. The bigger and older it gets, the weaker it becomes in the things that really count. Doctrinal convictions and standards of conduct are diluted to meet the minimum requirements of the prevailing sentiment of an institutionalized constituency. Settling down to lower and lower levels is the inevitable tendency in this process of degeneration sometimes boasted of as growth.

The history of Christianity in its pure and corrupted forms offers some striking testimony to such developments. In the early church individuals and congregations continued in "the apostles' doctrine and fellowship". It was the time of "the simplicity that is in Christ". Denominational organization with its inevitable institutional setup was unknown. The church grew, became popular, triumphed over persecution, conquered the government and became recognized. Organization broke out of the bonds of "the simplicity that is in Christ". Progress was the order of the day. In a few centuries the church had a pope and a hierarchy.

The influence of it is still strong in religious movements that originally started in protest against such abuses. The process is gradual. One departure from original simplicity calls for another. What is taken for granted today would not have been tolerated a generation ago. It is growth or is it? John Wesley would not recognize the Methodist church of today with its highly organized

modernism. Some of the sects which have broken away from it would more nearly harmonize with the ideals he zealously campaigned for.

Paul recognized the trends at work even while he was active and called it "the spirit of lawlessness". The law was the gospel order which came by inspiration. It was the doctrine, organization, worship and manner of life revealed from heaven. "The spirit of lawlessness" was rebellion against the restraints of divine law, no doubt in the name of progress and growth. Many were ready to contend that the Lord's way could not triumph over the world. Something more impressive had to be employed. Was the business man right? Will churches of Christ in time get over their evangelistic fervor and settle down on an institutional basis and respectably carry on in a denominational sort of way? It looks like we are on the way in spots. The Christian Church with its diluted doctrine, its emphasis on a social gospel and its general liberal attitude except in the despotism of its institutional organization has set us a good example once we drift away from simple and divine standards. We are already hearing about "What the church of Christ teaches", "our papers", "our schools", "our orphan homes", "our institutions" and other denominational terms which clearly indicate that some of us do not know what the church of the New Testament is.

Denominational language is a sure symptom of denominational thinking and if widespread enough will eventually lead to a denominational setup. Sure, a warning along this line will bring sneers and mockery from many just as it did a generation or so ago when the digressive movement started.

What, if anything, can be done about it? Form an organization to combat trends hostile to and leading away from the ancient order of things? The only remedy there is will be overlooked and spurned by the institutionally minded. It is too simple. It means "contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints", "holding the pattern of sound words" found in the New Testament, "guarding that which is committed unto thee", faith in God and suspicion of everything in religion of a purely human origin. What is the New Testament and what does it teach will have to be the consideration. Every step in the right direction and every protest against trends and worse will have to be made within the framework of the New Testament order.

The church in its widest usage includes all the children of God, all who have obeyed the gospel, baptized believers in Christ. Any use of the word church, which is smaller than this and larger than a local congregation is unscriptural and therefore misleading, unless it is properly qualified by some geographical term, such as "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria." There is the church or congregation in or at a certain place which is independent of any jurisdiction

except the law of the Lord revealed in the New Testament. With its elders and deacons, it is the nearest approach to institutionalism you can find in the New Testament. Individual disciples are the units which spark the whole movement. A knowledge of, and loyalty to the teaching of the New Testament on the part of all who care anything about it is the “sine qua non” of the whole situation. The right kind of preaching and teaching and plenty of it will keep us on the track and spare a wreck. Gospel Guardian, June 2, 1949