

A STEP BACKWARD IS A STEP FORWARD

A sermon preached by Batsell Barrett Baxter on Sunday, October 11, 1953 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee.

Is there ever a time when a step backward is a step forward? I believe there is. For example, back in 1935 Norvel Young and I were driving out to Kansas to spend the summer selling Bibles. On a very rainy Saturday night as we were driving west of St. Louis, on roads that we had never traveled before, we came to an intersection and took the wrong road. About seven miles later we discovered our mistake, and realized that the only way to get to our destination was to turn around and go back those seven miles to the right road. In a case like that--when you're on the wrong road--obviously a step backward is a step forward.

This illustration has its implications in the field of religion, for as time has passed we have often "lost the way." We must go back in order to go forward. We are living more than sixty generations after Jesus, yet we have not been able to stamp out the evils of the world that are so rampant about us. We are ineffective in fighting against crime and war and unbelief. Surely there is something wrong. In sixty generations we should have been able to remake the world into a Christian community, but we are far from it. In one of his greatest pre-Civil War speeches Abraham Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. This nation cannot long endure half-slave and half-free." Of course, we know that he borrowed this truth from Jesus, for it is in Matthew 12:25 that Jesus said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

In our twentieth century the religious world is divided into some three hundred different bodies, or churches, and we are fighting ineffectively against the evils of the world. Millions of us believe in Christ as the Son of God, yet the power of Christianity is vitiated by the divisions that exist. In all of this a step backward is the only possible way to make progress forward. We must achieve again the unity with which the church began.

The Falling Away

Actually we should begin our study with the apostasy or falling away. You know of the glorious beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost, A.A. 30. On that opening day the Lord's church began with three thousand members. A little later we read of five thousand men, and then of multitudes of both men and women. In one generation Christianity reached out and touched the whole known world. "All they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks," said the apostle Paul. (Acts 19:10). It was a grand beginning but Satan soon came to divide the church, thus sapping away its strength and blighting the success that might have been. In spite of such warnings as the one given by Paul to the Galatians, "Though we or an angel from heaven should preach unto you any other gospel than that which we have preached unto you let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, if any man preach unto you any other gospel than that which ye have received, let him be anathema." (Gal. 1:8-9). It was the apostle John who wrote, "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teachings of Christ hath not God (meaning that he hath not God's approval) but whosoever abideth in his teaching hath both the Father and the Son." (II John 9).

We are admonished in the countless passages (these are only typical ones) that we are not to go beyond the Lord's teachings. Likewise, we must not stop short. In very truth we are to speak where the Lord speaks and be silent where He is silent. Down through the ages that has not been the practice. Men have spoken where the Lord has not spoken; they have bound teachings upon followers that the Lord did not bind. They have drawn lines which the Lord did not draw. The story can be told briefly: Differences of opinion.....Open debates.....Councils.....Creeds.....Excommunications.....Anathemas.....Multiplicity of churches. These few words tell the story. As the centuries rolled by, instead of getting closer to God's plan, men got further and further from it. We usually think of the "Dark Ages" as political, and economic, etc, but they were dark also in the realm of religion. Tradition came to be more and more important, and what the various councils decreed became more and more binding.

The Reformation

In the course of time, in God's providence, the Reformation came. In the sixteenth century it came into its flower. Earlier there had been men like John Wycliffe, John Huss, Girolamo Savonarola--the pre-reformers. They gave their lives in order to say "The church is corrupt." It's a thrilling thing to think of these men, standing against the religious and political power of their day, to say, "We've drifted far from the original pattern."

In later generations came men like Martin Luther. Luther spoke of freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom of the individual to interpret the scriptures. Not the church, but the individual God-fearing man has the right to read the Bible, and interpret its meaning. After Luther there came others: Huldreich Zwingli, Hugh Latimer, John Knox, and John Calvin. Calvin's primary emphasis was on the sovereignty of God. John Wesley came still later and tried to restore feeling and conviction to the dry, lifeless forms of the religion of his day. For all these reformers we are grateful. They have helped men see that the only way is to listen as God speaks. I am grateful for men like John Wesley for he breathed into the lifeless forms and rituals of his church some of the life that is so desperately needed. Down through the ages these reformers have done much. These sixteenth century lights still shine. The tragedy

is, however, that they didn't go all the way back to the Bible. They reformed much that was wrong, but they stopped before they finished the job.

The Restoration

Nearly three centuries went by and then came the Restoration. The first name that I would like to mention is that of James O'Kelly, who lived in North Carolina and Virginia, over on the eastern seaboard. In the year 1793, he went to the Baltimore conference of his church and declared that he could no longer hold to some of the things that he had pledged himself to preach, because he could not find them in his Bible. The history of his day tells us that seven thousand members went with him, taking the Bible as their only guide. They endeavored to call things by Bible names and to do things as the Bible suggested they be done.

A few years later, in 1802, two New England preachers, Abner Jones and Elias Smith, were "disturbed over sectarian names and creeds," and left them to take only Bible names and Bible practices. These men were from a different church background. Out in what was then the frontier state of Kentucky, in the year 1804, a man by the name of Barton Larren Stone and a half-dozen other preachers felt the same way. They were from a third church background. "Why can't all of us who believe in Christ be united?" they asked. Why can't we just take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven"? In the year 1804, the Springfield Presbytery of their church had a meeting, and in that meeting they drew up what they called "The Last Will and Testament." Here is a portion of it: "The Presbytery of Springfield, sitting at Cans Ridge, in the county of Bourbon, being through a gracious providence in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily and in perfect soundness and composure of mind, but knowing that it is appointed to all delegated bodies once to die, and considering that the life of each such body is very uncertain, do make and ordain this our last will and testament in manner and form, the following, vis:

Imprimis, we will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large. There is but one body, one spirit even as we are called into one hope of our calling.

Item: We will that our name of distinction with its reverend title be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God's heritage and His name alone.

Item: We will that our power of making laws for the government of the church and executing them by delegated authority forever cease, that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ

Item: We will that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven, and as many as are offended with other books which stand in competition with it may cast them into the fire if they choose, for it is better to enter into life having one book than having many to be cast into hell.

Item: Finally, we will that all of our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully that they may see their fate therein determined, and prepare for death before it is too late.

June 28, 1804, signed by Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, Barton Stone, John Thompson, David Perviance

In a sermon delivered that same day, this explanation was given: "Their reasons for dissolving that body were the following: With deep concern they viewed the divisions and party spirit among professing Christians, principally owing to the adoption of human creeds and forms of government. As they proceeded in the investigation of this subject they soon found that there was neither precept or example in the New Testament for such confederacies as modern Church Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, General Assemblies, etc. They concluded that while they continued in the connection in which they then stood they were off the foundation of the apostles and prophets, of which Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone." We mention this to you that you may understand the emphasis that we try to make at this place. We are not in any sense members of any synod, presbytery, or any organization other than just the New Testament church. We believe with Stone and the others named, that the path of wisdom is to dissolve everything that is not as old as the New Testament, and go back and be Christians after the New Testament order.

In 1809, Thomas Campbell delivered what became known as the "Declaration and Address." He said, "Our desire, therefore, for ourselves and for our brethren would be, that rejecting human opinions and the inventions of men as of any authority or as having any place in the church of God, we might forever cease from further contentions about such things, returning to the word alone as our rule, the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide to lead us into all truth in Christ alone as exhibited in the Bible, the word for our salvation. In so doing we may be at peace among ourselves, follow peace with all men and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord ... Nothing ought to be admitted as of divine obligation in the church constitution and management but what is expressly enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles upon the New Testament church either in expressed terms or by approved precedent ... Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the church or be made a term of communion among the Christians that is not as old as the New Testament.

As you read these sentiments, I hope they say to you what they say to me: that good men from different religious bodies, desiring unity with all believers in Christ everywhere, say, "Why can't we just go back and take the Bible only." From the writings of these men, we can draw some conclusions about the things for which they were contending. Here are a few: (1) They were contending for the all sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. (2) They were contending that faith in Christ, as the promised Messiah, and obedience to His commands, constitute the only conditions to salvation. (3) They were contending that Christian baptism is an immersion in water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. That's the way it was done in New Testament times. (4) They were contending that believers were subjects of baptism. (5) They were contending that baptism, when administered to a believing penitent is for remission of past sins. As Peter said it on Pentecost, "unto the remission of your sins." (6) They were contending that in conversion that the Holy Spirit operates through the Truth and never without the Truth, so far as we can determine from the Bible. (7) They were contending that the organization of the church must be in accordance with the divine model as found in the New Testament. There must be no organization but what is found there. Finally, as the last of these summary propositions, (8) They were contending for a proper observance of the Lord's Supper, doing it every week as it was done in the early church and for many centuries after.

Now all of this is a matter of study and intellectual reasoning, but I believe that the open-hearted will see that it is solid ground. We want to be united, we need to be united, the Lord prayed that we be united, and the only possible way is in terms of going back and standing on His truths. Anything that I might add to them is not worthy of support, or anything that anybody may add is not worthy of acceptance in religion.

Are We Looking For The New?

In our day we hear much about things that are new. We live in an age when a premium is put on what's new. Anything that is more recent than something else is assumed to be better than that something else. That may be true in the things that men make: cars, airplanes, electrical appliances, and so on. It isn't true in the things that God makes. When God makes something He makes it perfect from the beginning. There hasn't been any improvement on God's sunshine or rain or seasons of the productivity of the ground. When God makes something He makes it right, and so it is in the realm of religion. There hasn't been any finer system of ethics or morals than you find in Christianity. Nobody has improved on Christ's sense of right and wrong. Nobody has improved on the example of Jesus. Hence, I believe it follows that no one has ever, or will ever, improve on Christ's church. God makes things right. There is a perfection in what God does. The essential need of our time is that all of us simply take a step backward, for that is the only way that we can go forward. When we return to the Bible, speaking where the scriptures speak and being silent where they are silent, when we develop a loyalty to what God says above anything that anyone else may say, when we have a "thus sayeth the Lord" for everything that we do, when we say "Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth," we are on the road which God would have us travel.

In the old-fashioned, New Testament way, we endeavor to preach the Gospel right out of the book. You read your Bible and I will read mine and together we will return to the Lord's church. In the old-fashioned way we close this study with the invitation that you believe on the Lord with all your heart, repent of your sins, confess the name of Jesus before men, and then be buried with Him in baptism. He will add you to His family, His church, and you will go on your way rejoicing toward heaven itself.