Wednesday, January 11, 2012 – The challenge that faces the church

Most members of the Lord’s church sense that something is happening in the church. They may not be exactly certain what it is, but they know there is anxiety, unrest, and conflict. The purpose of this multi lesson study is designed to help Christians understand what is happening in the church. What are the issues? How serious are they? Should we be concerned? In order to understand what is happening in the church, we need to look at some historical background.

It is clear that, if the church is to be faithful in carrying out of the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49**) then it must seriously and strenuously address itself to the matter of the defense of the faith against various forms of false doctrine and practices which are contrary to the plain teaching of the scripture that are occurring today. Let’s take a step back and see how things have changed in recent years.

First, members of the Lord’s church have been called to be clearly distinct from the world and from denominationalism. We become members of the Lord’s church when we obey the Gospel of Christ and the Lord adds us to His church (**Acts 2:38-41, 47**). Anyone, anywhere, anytime can (and will) become a member of the church bought, built, and owned by Christ when he/she confesses faith in the Sonship of Christ, repents of sins, and is baptized into Christ in order to receive the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ. When such ones in any locality then worship and work and are content to be organized into a congregation as specified in the New Testament, they constitute the Lord’s church. In days past, members of the church knew that they stood alone in the religious world, primarily because of the insistence upon baptism for remission of sins (**Acts 2:38**), emphasis upon the identity of the church (**Matthew 16:18**), and the persistence that God gives us a pattern for worship within the New Testament.

Opposition strengthened the church especially when the opposition was open and direct. There were public debates dealing with “thus saith the Lord” and “book, chapter, and verse.” The church came out in the forefront of these discussions, so much so that denominations ultimately ceased to participate in the debates or to offer any public defense of their doctrine in such a format.

Unfortunately, just as the opposition had strengthened the Lord’s church and caused members to know what they believe and why, the lack of opposition caused some to grow soft and indifferent. Without the opposition and frontal attacks, their interest in doctrinal preaching waned and so did their knowledge and understanding of the truth. As a result, doctrinal resolve weakened and many were left vulnerable to the influence of false teaching and error.

Second, the apostle John long ago warned, “**Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever**” (**1 John 2:15-17**). Most of us would admit that the world is more affluent than it was when we were children. Not many wives or mothers worked outside of the home, families were able to survive on one income. Today, people make more money, spouses work outside of the home, we have multiple cars, we buy and go and do like never before. These factors are cited to merely to show that the world has changed and that our outlook is different to that which existed only a few years ago. Do not lose sight of the fact that the impact of such changes is likewise felt upon the church. People tend to be more materialistic and more concerned about worldly things. There is less spiritual emphasis in our society as a whole. Worldly influence has a way of gradually altering the way one thinks. It is not always easy to be distinct, to be different than those around us.

Third, the emphasis in the church has always been on speaking where the Bible speaks and, remaining silent where the Bible is silent. Gospel preachers were determined to speak nothing but sound doctrine. The words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ give warning of false teachers who would lead the flock of God astray. He revealed their identifying mark -- we will be able to know they are false teachers by their fruit (teaching, doctrine). Jesus also warned, ***"And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many...For there shall arise false christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect"*** (**Matt. 24:11,24**).

The inspired Peter predicted, ***"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."*** The sad result of their false teaching is that ***"many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of"*** (**2 Peter 2:1-2**).

The Lord's church has had plenty of false, deceiving, corrupt teachers arising from the inside. We have been plagued with supporters of false doctrines that have divided the body of Christ. More damage and destruction is often accomplished when men arise out of our own midst speaking perverse things. We will always have the burden of false prophets and teachers preaching and teaching soul damning doctrines which lead men astray. The results of traveling down the broad way, engaged in sin, will be destruction in eternal hell (**Matt. 7:13-14**).

 We must keep in mind when we read the New Testament that we are reading the words of the Savior. Paul wrote, ***"If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord"***(**1 Cor. 14:37**). The Lord sent the Holy Spirit to inspire the writers of the New Testament. ***"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come"***(**John 16:13**).  Peter explained how the words of the New Testament came to be. ***"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost"***(**2 Peter 1:20-21**). No man was given a thought and left to his own discretion as to exactly what to write. All the writers were "carried along" or "borne along" by the Holy Spirit who was communicating the very words of Jesus. Jesus told the apostles, ***"He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you"***(**John 16:14- 15**). The Father told the Son; the Son told the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit inspired the men to write heaven's words.

Now, understanding that principle, we turn our attention to what the New Testament (the words of the Savior) has to say about sound doctrine.   Paul wrote, ***"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine****;* ***but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables"***(**2 Tim. 4:3-4**). Paul was exhorting Timothy to remain faithful to the doctrine which had come from heaven (**1 Tim. 1:3**; **2 Tim. 2:2**). The young preacher was warned by the aged apostle that there would be some who would turn from sound doctrine and turn unto fables. Paul equates sound doctrine with truth in this text, speaking of sound doctrine in one verse and the truth in another.  Paul also wrote, ***"Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrineboth to exhort and to convince the gainsayers"*** (**Titus 1:9**). The context of this verse concerns itself with the qualifications of an elder. An elder (bishop) is to be able to convict one, by using sound doctrine, who would speak against or deny truth (a gainsayer). This command came from the Savior also. Again Paul wrote: ***"But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine****"*(**Titus 2:1**).

How can those among us today say doctrine is not important? Jesus said to speak that which is sound doctrine. Therefore, because we are commanded to speak sound doctrine, there is the danger of speaking that which is not sound! That which is not sound is to be avoided (**Rom. 16:17-18**). The word "sound" means "to have sound health, i.e. be well (in body); fig. to be uncorrupt (true in doctrine): be in health, (be safe and) sound, (be) whole (-some)" [Strong's]. Sound doctrine is that which is healthy to us spiritually. To teach doctrine that is not sound is to teach a corrupted doctrine that will cause one to be lost, not saved.

There are serious challenges confronting the church. We face troublesome times. If all mankind would determine to go back to the Bible and the Bible alone for their rule of faith and practice, then the current apostasy going on would come to a screeching halt.

Next week we will look at some examples where congregations need to turn from dangerous practices which are contrary to God’s word.