

Responding to the Apostasy of Our Nation

[Why the term *apostasy* accurately describes our nation... and what we can do about it.]

The word *apostasy* refers to a departure from the teachings of the Bible, and from obedience to what the Bible says. We live in a nation that could be characterized by this word. Though "religion" may be on the increase, it is not "religion" that God wants. Rather, God wants obedience and loyalty to the truth - to God and his Word, the Bible. And this has not occurred.

Our nation has experienced a major spiritual decline. Though many people are willing to call themselves "Christian," few are willing to put God first in everything - which is what he requires. In some instances, those who call themselves "Christian" actually live worse than unbelievers! People are willing to talk (or preach or sing) about putting God first. But those who are willing to exchange mere talk for action, to really put God first (in all areas of life), other people second, and themselves last, are few in number, and increasingly opposed - *even by many who call themselves "Christians"!*

The problem *isn't* that the majority of these "Christians" are doing *bad* things. More often than not, it is the *absence* of the *more-important good* things that is the problem. It is the fact that the values reflected by their choices do not reflect a love for God and neighbor, that *surpasses* love for self (see Mark 12:28-34). Their lives are filled with *good* things, but it is not the good that God is looking for. God wants them to be filled with a desire to reflect the ways of God *in all that they do*. Yet they plan their lives without an ongoing focus on God and his glory.

Life is filled with decisions - decisions about what we *will* do, as well as what we *won't* do (and what we will simply ignore). For many people, if we were to compare the things they *do* have time for, with the things they claim they *don't* have time for (including the things they *choose* to not have time for), a self-centered focus would become quite obvious. They might not choose to do *evil* things, but when they choose to do good things based on what pleases *them*, and when they fail to make their decisions based on what brings honor to *God*, it is a reflection of a heart that values self more than God and neighbor. Of course, such people may claim that observations like this are "judgmental," but this is not the case. If anyone is judging them, it is God, for the Bible clearly describes which values are to be given the greater emphasis, and how to respond when different values "conflict." It's *not* that God failed to warn us.

If a person begins the day by asking questions, such as, "What would I like to do?" (in the sense of "What would please *me* the most?"), he would not necessarily be choosing activities that are inherently evil. Often the evil comes because of what the person is *neglecting*. God wants us to ask questions, such as, "How can I bring honor and glory to God, in what I do?" And "How can I show love to my neighbors - even to those who are my enemies?" He wants us to live-out a life that reflects a greater love for God and neighbor, than for self. (And if we don't know how to do this, he wants us to be willing to search the Scriptures, to find out.) Even everyday activities, such as eating and drinking, are to be done with a focus on the glory of God and the good of our neighbor! See 1 Corinthians 10:31 and 1 Corinthians 8:13. (This second verse refers to instances in which one's eating of something would have a detrimental effect on someone else. It does not refer to instances in which someone wants to push his own dietary opinions upon others.)

According to the Bible, when we are made alive in Christ, we *die* to self. Therefore, we can no longer live for ourselves; *nor do we have a right to do so*. (How can a dead person live for himself?) Instead, since our life is now a reflection of Christ's life, we must live for God. (How could we do differently? Can Christ live selfishly?)

Yet so many, who claim to have been made *new* in Christ, continue to live for themselves. Admittedly, they might have "cleaned up" their lives. They might have begun to make good choices, instead of going after things that are easily recognized as sin. This is a good start, but it is not enough, for they are still making *self*, rather than God, the chief determining factor in what they choose to do.

Many would claim that they are *not opposed* to "putting God first" - it's just that they just don't do it. Some may consider it acceptable in certain aspects of life (such as when they are practicing "religious activities"), but they exclude him from their normal activities of "daily life." Some may believe that "putting God first" is just one of several legitimate options - they may even claim that it is the *best* choice, but that they are satisfied with *second best*. For whatever reason, though they may talk positively about it, they just don't do it in their own lives. Their choices and actions demonstrate that they don't do it. Self, rather than God, has precedence in their decision-making.

God says that a person can be recognized by his "fruit" - by what he does in his life. Even when a person claims to put God first, if his lifestyle shows that he doesn't, then he doesn't. His empty words don't mean as much as his actions. God requires his people to *be* "salt" and "light," not just to talk about it. And he definitely doesn't say, "It's O.K. if you choose to be salt and light, but it's *also* O.K. if you don't."

There are consequences when those who claim to be "God's people" deny it by the choices they make. Their actions have effects not only on themselves, but on everyone around them. Even those outside the church are affected.

One of the effects this has had on the world is moral decline. As so-called "Christians" have become less "Christ-like," their positive influence on society has diminished. As a result, the ability of the church to have a restraining effect on the evils of society has also diminished. After all, how can people have a positive effect of restraining the sins of *others*, when they refuse to deal with *their own* sins?

In our nation, this spiritual and moral decline has been going on for many years. This has resulted in a rampant increase of evil. It has also resulted in a dramatic shift in moral perspective, so that conduct that was once generally recognized as evil (because of the Bible's influence on society) is now promoted as good. When the moral compass of the Bible is rejected, the most basic perceptions of right and wrong become distorted.

This decline also has an effect on the world's attitude toward those people who still *accept* the Bible as the rule for their life and conduct. As people become more tolerant to sin, they become less tolerant to those who would attempt to *restrain* sin. Ultimately, the hostility can increase to the point that persecution breaks out against those who accept the Bible as the moral standard for life. Ironically, it may even affect the fakes - those who claim to be "Christians" but who don't put God first in their lives. They may experience persecution, since the world doesn't normally admit the distinction between the genuine and the fakes.

The idea of persecution is not pleasant. But the real disciples of Jesus have a hope that the others do not have: God gives his people (the real ones) the strength to endure whatever they must - at the time they need it. Furthermore, if persecution does occur, God has guaranteed that he will use it to accomplish good in the lives of *all* who truly belong to him (see to Romans 8:28-39). In times past, when this has occurred, God has proven himself faithful to his people and has not abandoned them. In fact, in many places around the world, he has even increased their number, using the persecution to strengthen and purify, rather than to destroy.

At the same time, if persecution comes, God will use it for judgment against those who do *not* love him - those who openly hate him, as well as those who merely *claim* to love him. Except for the few who may repent, no lasting good will come to them. This judgment may be active or passive. It may range anywhere from physical pain, brought on by other people, to a spiritual hardening of hearts, in preparation for the final day of God's justice.

Persecution already exists in many parts of the world. We should not think that it will *never* happen to us. Though conditions in our nation are not good, and are getting worse, we do not need to let these things discourage us. After all, though God has told us that things like this would happen - not just in our nation,

but throughout the world, he has also promised that he would remain with us, and would give us the power to be his disciples, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20). So though evil may be increasing all around us, good things are happening in us. Though we live in a dark world, the light of God's truth continues to shine. God is doing great things among his true people! So because of all this, we have every reason to be encouraged!

Though the darkness is great, throughout the world, it has not totally prevailed. In spite of growing hostility and evil, God is doing great things in many parts of the world. Great spiritual awakenings are occurring in various parts of Africa, Asia and South America. Even in our own nation, there are still many "shining lights" - people who love God more than they love themselves. Though our nation may deserve great judgment, having, for the most part, abandoned the source of all true blessings, we should not give-up hope for our nation - even if things seem to grow more hopeless every day. Until judgment does fall upon us, we should continue pressing on, in the hope that revival might occur, instead.

Each of us must examine ourselves *first*, and see the extent to which we have contributed to the problem. We must also examine our church (after we have dealt with our own sins), for we are a part of it. What are our values? What is the focus of our lives? How do we use our money and our "free time"? Do our lives show love for God and neighbor (including the "neighbors" we don't like) - or do they show a greater love for our own selves? How do we treat our enemies? (After all, Jesus says that they are also our neighbors.)

We must never forget that even *good* things can become evil in the sight of God, when they are preferred over *more important* things. Whatever it may be - friends or family, plans or possessions, activities or achievements, even religious activities and ceremonies - each of these can be given so much emphasis, that they receive more attention than God and neighbor do. When this happens, we have turned good things into evil.

Our love for our neighbor must be so great, that we would be willing to deny ourselves - and if necessary, to even "sacrifice" ourselves - as an expression of that love. Our love and loyalty to God, however, must be even greater - so great, that the love we have for our neighbor (including friends and family) would look like "hate" (Luke 14:26), in comparison to our love for God. Simply said, we must follow Jesus Christ's example, if we want Jesus to be our brother (Matthew 12:50), and God to be our Father (Matthew 5:44-45).

Being a disciple of Jesus has never been easy. Without the strength he gives us, all of us would fail; we could do nothing, for without him, we are dead. (See Ephesians 2:1, etc.) However, he has given his life to us who are his disciples; he has exchanged our deadness for his life. So we *can* do these things (obedience and love) - and increasingly so, as we learn from Jesus (through the Bible) how to live. This expression of life will show that we are, in truth, his disciples. We are a living part of the "vine" (John 15), and not just a piece of "dead wood."

There is a blessing, a noble calling, for those who live this life of a disciple. There is a special purpose for our lives, a special "calling" that has eternal significance, *no matter what our circumstances may be*. Those of us who do these things, who live as disciples of Jesus, will have done our part to influence and change the world. We will be like lights, making the truth visible, and like salt, restraining the corruption of sin in this world. We won't be able to change everybody, but we will have an influence on our own little corner of the world - influence beyond what we can see in this present life.

There may be times that those who oppose God's ways will oppose us. But we will have, as our friend, the greatest friend the world has ever known. Though he is our master (the meaning of the word "Lord"), he is also our friend. He will be with us forever, and will one day say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"