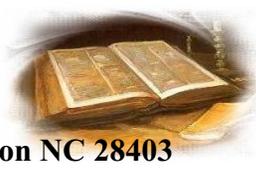


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Warnings From The Past

- By Farris J. Smith, Birmingham, Alabama -

"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set." (**Prov. 22:28**) "Thus saith the Lord, stand ye in the ways, and see and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." (**Jer. 6:16**) "Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight." (**Psalms 119:35**) Men should ever be reminded of the necessity of walking in the old paths and of doing the things that God wants done in the way that God wants them done.

There is a very definite sense in which the child of God is not to look back. Jesus said, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (**Luke 9:62**) There is a sense however, in which we can profit by looking back. We can look back at the mistakes made by others and avoid making the same mistakes. Had Israel looked back at her own mistakes and profited by them she could have saved herself from much sorrow.

Many today are making the same mistakes that have been made by religious people in all ages.

The church was built according to a divine pattern and was therefore perfect in organization. It has Christ as its head. (**Col. 1:18**) It had the apostles and other inspired teachers to direct it while they lived, and after they passed on it has the New Testament as its complete guide book. (**2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:3**) The divine pattern of church organization is perfect. As congregations were established each was independent of all others and as such had its own elders and deacons. (**Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1**) There were no presiding elders, popes, cardinals or any such thing in those days. We do not read in the New Testament of a congregation deciding on a work larger than it could do and calling on all churches around them to help out. In emergencies they helped one another but retained their independence. They did the work that God wanted done without any super organization. Each

congregation functioned through the simple organization that God had given. With no organization other than the local congregation the apostles and others preached the gospel unto the then known world. (**Col. 1:23**) What a shame that we have men in the church now who believe that we cannot do the work that they did with the organization they had. Let it be remembered that had we needed any other organization God could and would have given it. When men get smarter than God, in their own estimation, and set out to improve on God's ways apostasy results.

The church was warned of an apostasy that was to come. (**Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:29, 30; 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:1-4**) The history of the church after the Bible had been completed shows that it did fall away as predicted. It did not go into apostasy all at once, but it was a gradual process. I suggest that therein lies our danger at the present time. We are likely to add a little here and a little there, a little this year and more next year until we have gone far from God's pattern. The church departed in organization. A few steps in the wrong direction led to others and they finally led to the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Councils and conventions were soon making laws and claiming that they were God's laws. They brought in this and that innovation until the Roman

Catholic Church stood full grown. **LET HIM WHO WOULD DEPART FROM THE DIVINE PATTERN OF CHURCH ORGANIZATION IN ANY PARTICULAR TAKE WARNING FROM THIS {emp. J.C.}**. No man nor congregation goes astray suddenly — it is a gradual process. Every congregation that takes the first step in the wrong direction stands in danger of going all of the way.

For lack of space we pass over the Reformation Movement and its importance and take up that movement known to us as the Restoration Movement. Men who loved the Lord were determined to serve him in his way. They took their stand firmly upon the Word of God and stood there. They profited by the mistakes of the reformers and therefore did not attempt to reform the apostate church. Their purpose was to restore the "ancient order." Recognizing the Word as the seed of the kingdom, they adopted the slogan, "We will speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent," they began to call Bible things by Bible names and to do Bible things in Bible ways. They thus began restoring the church to its original purity.

As this movement grew men made mistakes. The worship was corrupted by bringing in instrumental music. Some thought

that the church was not doing enough mission work so they organized missionary societies. Conscientious brethren would not tolerate these things, and as a result many of them had to give up their buildings and start over. David Lipscomb along with many others stood firmly against such things. Brother Lipscomb was referred to as an old woman with a broom trying to sweep back the tide of 'progress but he stood firm. These men managed to stem the tide of digression to some extent, but in spite of their efforts another denomination came into being. This apostate body known as the Christian Church has taken its place with the denominations and today there is little resemblance to the church that Jesus built.

The problems that the church faces today are not new. The questions being asked now are the same questions that have faced brethren in the past. Just as the missionary society plagued people in days past other things based upon the same misconceptions are causing confusion and chaos today. We shy off of the words missionary society, presiding elders, conferences, councils, etc., but too many among us are not too afraid of the ideas contained in them.

In view of these warnings from the past it is timely to consider prayerfully these current problems. My objective in this lesson is to

introduce in brief some of the problems and arguments that will be dealt with in full by others in this series.

Men have again tampered with church organization. A nation-wide radio program spending thousands of dollars for thirty minutes weekly of singing and preaching furnishes an opportunity for the universal church to function as such. Small congregations that ought to be busy functioning in a local capacity find it much more convenient to pour their dollars into the treasury of a larger congregation and to cast their responsibility upon the shoulders of another eldership who have taken on a work much larger than they can handle alone. If elders have any right to oversee a work larger than that of the local congregation where is the scripture that so teaches? Men are so carried away with the idea of what the universal church can do that they are little interested in what the local congregation ought to be doing.

In a mad rush for worldly recognition men have ignored the scriptural mission of the church. The older preachers among us preached much on the mission of the church. The lines were clearly drawn and men understood what the mission of the church was and how it was to carry out this mission. Little sermonettes on theories of men, psychology, sociology, etc., have permitted a generation to grow

up who know little of what God expects the church to do. Any congregation that stays busy preaching the gospel, helping its poor and edifying itself will find little time to speculate on what we can do through some super organization.

Brethren are swiftly outgrowing the idea of the all-sufficiency of the church. In days past we have used the argument of the all-sufficiency of the church with telling effect against human societies of denominationalism. It is time to make application of the same argument to "our" own projects. Some group sees the denominations with their super organizations busy at benevolent work and asks why not us? They engage in a lot of talk about what the church does not do, until someone says let us do something. I give a hearty amen to that, but add, let it be scriptural when we do it. A large institution is built to care for orphans. What orphans? They answer any orphans. Are these all charges of the church? Who cares so long as we have a large institution like the people around us? If any congregation has as its charge more orphans than it can support they can certainly call on others in their emergency. But to create such an emergency by gathering together all of the orphans that we can find, and to call on churches to support them is foreign to what we read in the New Testament. Men have gone all out for congregational cooperation. In a frenzied effort to do something big the autonomy of the local congregation is disregarded. That there is a scriptural way to cooperate we all agree. (**Acts 11:29, 30**) In what way can congregations cooperate then? One church can help another church bear its own burdens. When a church sets out to help another church carry on some big work it has thought up it has departed from the divine pattern. To justify some of our big ideas men have contended that what an individual can do a congregation can do. Paul answered this argument in **1 Timothy 5:8-11**. It is not needful, in the face of this scripture, that I go into detail about what one can do as an individual. It is sufficient to say that there are many good works that I can do as an individual that the congregation as such is not to do. Some of these are enumerated in the reference just given.

Have we learned anything from the mistakes of the past? Evidently not much. We should have learned that the organization of the church as God gave it needs no streamlining. We should have learned that the mission of the church is well outlined in the New Testament. We should have learned that the church is all-sufficient to do all that God wants done. We should have learned that centralized control and oversight is the working of man and not of God. In short, let us learn to walk in the old paths, to ask for the old ways and to give a thus saith the Lord for what we practice in religion.

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