

GOOD PEOPLE IN BAD CHURCHES

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Introduction

Rampant liberalism in churches of Christ has produced rampant apostasy over the past five decades. Hundreds of congregations that were at their inception strong in the Truth have become unrecognizable by New Testament standards. This phenomenon has produced a circumstance in which thousands of brethren, still faithful in their convictions in the Truth, have found themselves members of apostate churches. Numerous brethren have asked me what they can/should do about the liberal congregation of which they are members. This question and its Scriptural answer are as practical as they are consequential. Let us consider these matters.

When God announced the coming destruction of “Babylon” in Revelation 18, He warned His people: “Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (v. 4). This warning applies to God’s people in the “Babylons” of every age and species, including the many apostate congregations of our time that have rebelled against Heaven. What can/should faithful brethren who may still be in them do? The answer from Scripture is clear: **“Come forth, my people....”** Many good brethren have obeyed this warning and have left such corrupt bodies in recent years, but likely thousands of unhappy saints yet remain in them.

“Come forth”—The Fellowship Factor

The Heavenly voice warned God’s faithful people to “come forth” because they must “have no fellowship” with Babylon’s sins. *Fellowship* refers to sharing in common or jointly participating in given activities and/or interests with others. Those who stay in a liberal congregation are in fellowship with its errors—it is that simple. God has **never** approved of His children’s having fellowship with His enemies.

Zero fellowship permitted: “Some” fellowship with sin and error is not an option. The consistent rule of Scripture is **“no fellowship”**: “Have **no** fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14–18; emph. DM). In such passages, the Lord through Paul addressed fellowship with unbelievers, but the teaching is the same concerning apostate brethren: **“Receive him not** into your house, and **give him no greeting**: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works” (2 John 10–11; cf. 1 Cor. 5:9–11; 2 The. 3:6; emph. DM).

God’s Word knows nothing of the Rubel Shelly scheme of “Big F” and “Little f” “levels of fellowship”—the doctrine of “limited fellowship” (which apes the heretical Ketcherside/Garrett

“Gospel/doctrine” dichotomy). Those who remain in a church bent on error violate the Lord’s “no fellowship” prohibition.

Contributing money on the Lord’s day is one means of fellowship with a congregation. Contributors in a church that is unfaithful help support false teaching from its pulpit, liberal missionaries, and all of the erroneous doctrines and practices of that church, even if said contributors object to them. Liberal elders and preachers (and most brotherhood-related university administrators) pay little attention to verbal opposition. The one language they understand is **M-O-N-E-Y**. There is little hope of eradicating the current digression so many congregations now manifest, but it might be significantly slowed if thousands of objecting brethren would “come forth” from them and cease supporting them financially.

Besides their financial **fellowship**, good brethren who remain in a bad church also implicitly **endorse** the congregation’s errors. All of the objections one might offer to digressive elders and preachers begin to sound hollow and insincere after awhile when one stays in spite of the doctrinal departures. Merely registering objections is insufficient. Verily, as long as one is a member of an apostate church he is endorsing its apostasy. **For this reason** John forbade extending any indication of encouragement or endorsement to false teachers; to do so is to participate in their errors and the Lord’s judgment against them (2 John 10–11; Mat. 7:21–23).

“Come Forth”—The Danger Factor

The Lord stated a second significant reason His people must exit “Babylon”: He was going to bring plagues upon her, which those—good and evil alike—who remained in her would also suffer. One dare not assume that God will hold only the **leaders** in today’s “Babylons” responsible. While their responsibility is greater, their supporters are likewise culpable, and will suffer the same judgment rendered against their leaders. Even the apostles would have been “rooted up” or would “fall into the pit” (i.e., be lost) had they followed or supported erroneous leaders (Mat. 15:13–14).

Had Lot, his wife, and his daughters not fled Sodom, God would have destroyed them with that wicked city. The Lord urged their **hasty departure** to escape God’s judgment (Gen. 19:12–17; cf. 2 Pet. 2:7). Likewise, the Lord would have His faithful ones to “come forth” from corrupt congregations to escape the “plagues” that God will surely visit upon them (Rev. 2:20–23; 22:18–19).

One who remains in an unfaithful congregation also runs the risk of becoming “desensitized” to error. Though at first he might strongly object to the departures he sees, by

staying in such a church one may be lulled into complacency toward them—the “boiled frog” syndrome. He may begin to rationalize the errors and to exalt sincerity over Truth.

Further Motivations to Move

Revelation 18:4 sets forth two reasons why faithful saints must flee modern “Babylons,” but there are additional fundamental and practical reasons.

- **To Support Truth and Righteousness:** One who remains in a digressive church not only supports error, but he robs God and His faithful people of the fellowship and support due them. Not only should one not want to support false doctrine, he should greatly desire to support only sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2–3; Tit. 2:1). As long as one remains in and supports a liberal church, he robs the Lord and faithful brethren) of his time, talents, money, and every means of his support and endorsement. This reason alone should be sufficient to cause one to “come forth” from an apostate group
- **To Save One’s Soul:** One should flee a liberal congregation for the sake of his own soul. Remaining in a “Babylon” church makes one subject to God’s eternal judgment against it. As already noted, although Lot objected to Sodom’s sins, had he remained in it he would have perished with its perverted populace. Similarly, for the sake of spiritual survival, every Christian who objects to the errors in his “home” congregation should leave it. We all need to be in a congregation that constantly urges us to honor God’s Word in everything we say and do (Col. 3:17). We need to hear error identified and refuted (1 Tim. 4:1–2). These things will help us to serve Christ faithfully and reach Heaven at last. In a liberal church, not only are none of these found, but their opposites abound.
- **To Save One’s Children:** Parents of small children who remain in an apostate congregation are very unwise and shortsighted. They (especially fathers) have the responsibility to nurture their children “in the chastening and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Parents who stay in a liberal congregation fail in this duty, even if they teach their children correctly and provide a good example before them at home. Their influence will likely not be able to counteract the acceptance of “social” drinking, dancing, unscriptural marriages, theistic evolution, instrumental music in worship, fellowship with the denominations, worship innovations, and such like that are common to more and more congregations. Also, the “peer pressure” of other children will work against the parents. Lot lost at least two daughters and their families in Sodom’s destruction. Although he urged, “Up, get you out of this place,” they had been so influenced by their surroundings that they refused his plea (Gen. 19:12–14). He sacrificed them by foolishly rearing them in Sodom. Some today are as obstinate as Lot—even if it

means the loss of their children to error. They, as Lot did, continue to linger when they should have fled (vv. 15–16).

While otherwise good parents in liberal churches may at home point out the errors the children are encountering in “Bible” classes and worship assemblies, eventually those children will figure out their parents’ hypocrisy in staying in such a church. If parents want their children to grow up with any semblance of strong convictions in the Truth, they dare not linger in a liberal congregation.

Excuses, Excuses

In spite of the numerous compelling reasons why Truth-loving brethren should have nothing to do with an apostate religious body (even if it falsely still sports a *Church of Christ* sign on its property!), a large number of them continue to do so. They offer various excuses for their behavior:

- **We Can Help:** “We don’t agree with what’s going on, but we hope we can correct these things by staying.” Admittedly, some congregations have not reached the “point of no return” in their digression. In such cases, those who are zealous for the Truth should stay and “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3). However, when congregational leaders have obviously succumbed to liberalism, it is practically impossible to reclaim them. To them, those who criticize erroneous doctrine or practice are just pesky “trouble makers.”

Most of the larger urban congregations are either well on their way to, or have reached, the “point of no return” in doctrine and practice. Their leaders have taken a leftward course. As the consuming flame draws the moth, so the “broad way” that ends in destruction has enticed them (Mat. 7:13). They have money, power, and worldly ambition, and they roll over any who get in their way. After repeated objections brought to such leaders with no positive response, one is terribly naive who believes that he can redirect them. To stay with them is to contribute to tearing down that which the Lord wants us to build. In doing so one only wastes effort, time, influence, and money on a lost cause—and will lose his soul in the bargain. The Lord’s command concerning hardened apostate religious leaders is: “Let them alone: they are blind guides. And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit” (15:14).

- **Family and Friends:** “Although I don’t approve of this congregation, I can’t leave my kindred and best friends.” We should all possess “natural affection” (Rom. 1:31). However, all other affections must be secondary to one’s affection for the Christ and His Word (Mat. 6:24, 33; 10:34–36; 22:36–37). We correctly appeal to members of denominations to come out of those sinful institutions, even if it means sacrificing family and friends. It is no less appropriate to

appeal to brethren whose family ties and friendships bind them to digressive “churches of Christ.”

- **Too Much Invested:** “I have been a member of this congregation for years, and I have invested too much money and time to walk away from it.” It is painful to lose investments, but it is sometimes necessary. Spiritual issues far outweigh mere material ones. That one is so concerned over money or time is a “dead giveaway” that the priceless treasure of Truth and one’s eternal destiny are not one’s priorities (Mat. 6:21). One whose house is in the path of a raging flood is a fool if he tells would-be rescuers he has invested too much time and money in it to leave. In both cases, these folk have **already** lost their “investments” **whether they go or stay**. The member of the liberal church has lost his “investments,” and by remaining in it, he compounds those losses. He had better be concerned with the far greater loss of his soul if he continues to support error and sin (Mat. 5:30; 16:26; 2 John 9–11).

Some cannot bear to leave behind the building their money and/or hands helped to build. A brother once asked me what he should do about the liberalism in the church (which had earned its well-deserved reputation over several years) of which he was a member. He told me many sad details about their departures. I knew he had at one time been an elder there, but he told me he had resigned some time earlier because his objections were repeatedly ignored. I had assumed he agreed with the liberalism because he had continued to stay there. When I asked why he stayed he said that he (and some others) did not want to “give up” the building. He failed to comprehend that the liberals long before gained control of the building (as his resignation indicated). In such cases, it is folly to think that one is “saving the building” by staying.

A building is only a building. It can be replaced, but a soul that stays in a digressive church will be lost and never recovered—for the Truth or for eternity. As I would unhesitatingly urge a man to flee his fire-engulfed house as a lost cause, so do I counsel brethren who remain in liberal-infested churches in their vain attempt to “save the building.”

- **Fear of Division:** “I don’t approve of the corruptions and innovations I see in this congregation, but I might cause division if I leave.” One should be cautious and concerned about division, but one dare not favor a false “peace” or “unity” above Truth and godliness. Liberals have falsely accused many a devoted saint of “causing division” when all they did was stand for the Truth and object to unauthorized doctrines or deeds.

I confess to encouraging division **when the Truth is at stake**. Our Lord is “the Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6), but He rules with a “sword” that is often divisive (Mat. 10:34; Luke 12:51–52;

Eph. 6:17). When some in a congregation refuse to submit to God's Word and others are determined to do so, division is inevitable. The Lord anticipated such divisions, and they have His blessing (1 Cor. 11:19). **Those who have abandoned the Truth are the culprits in such cases**, regardless of accusations to the contrary. Brethren should not let the *church divider* charge intimidate them.

- **Nowhere to Go:** "I don't agree with the preaching and practices of this congregation, but where can I go?" This problem especially perplexes those who live where the only congregation designated "church of Christ" has apostatized. In such cases, **it is time to begin a new congregation**. Brethren in hundreds of places did so a century or more ago when digressives forced the instrument and the missionary society into almost every congregation. Many sacrificed greatly as heartless heretics, operating as religious bullies, forced them to choose between compromising or leaving.

Those faithful spiritual ancestors understood the spiritual application of Solomon's words: "Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble therewith" (Pro. 15:16; 16:8). Some of these godly folk began congregations in their homes with only their own family unit as members, but they were determined to be faithful to God. The time has come again to demonstrate such grit and character for those in unsound churches who would "worship in spirit and truth" and maintain a "good conscience" (John 4:23–24; Heb. 13:18). While the modern innovations are more varied than those of the past, they represent the same kind of rebellion against New Testament authority. God-fearing brethren who live in areas where sound congregations exist have no excuse for remaining in unsound congregations. They cannot sincerely ask, "Where can I go?"

- **We Like the Youth Program:** "Many of the things being done in the church here are unscriptural, but it has a large group of children the ages of ours." As I suggested earlier, having children should be a compelling reason for leaving, rather than for staying in a liberal church. What parents "gain" in peers and programs for their children they more than lose to the harmful influence, emphasis, and teaching, as already enumerated. It would be far better for one's children to be reared in a congregation that provides wholesome doctrine and spiritual emphasis with only one or two others (or even none) their ages than in a congregation with a multitude their age where Scriptural teaching and example are absent. Remember Lot's folly—and losses.
- **No Perfect Congregation:** "I know this congregation has many problems in doctrine and practice, but so did the church in Corinth, and Paul still called it a 'church of God.'" Liberals

have so often repeated this prattle to justify their apostasies that some otherwise sound brethren now parrot it. Such is a classic illustration of comparing “apples” with “oranges.” True, Paul addressed the defective Corinthian brethren as “the church of God” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), but this is hardly the end of the matter. The principal aim of Paul’s letters to them was to correct those errors and their purveyors. He believed—correctly—that the church was salvageable. Most of the Corinthians were penitent (2 Cor. 7:5–16), and Paul warned the few who were not that he would deal with them when he arrived (12:20–21; 13:2–10). Had the church refused his reproofs, he could not have continued in fellowship with them and been consistent with his own teaching (Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:11–13; Eph. 5:11; Tit. 3:10; et al.) or with the Lord’s (Mat. 7:15–16; 15:13–14; 16:6, 12; et al.). One who concludes that Paul’s address of the Corinthian church as “the church of God” somehow justifies a congregation’s apostasy is sorely mistaken.

Paul dealt with these errors as soon as he learned of them—before their perpetrators had become entrenched and had gained unbreakable control. Unlike many present-day error-plagued congregations, the Corinthian errors did not represent a long-standing pattern of liberalism and disregard for the Truth. Numerous faithful brethren have again and again exposed and rebuked the errors of modern apostate congregations, only to see them resolutely march further into radicalism. Unlike the Corinthian church, there is no realistic hope that they will return to the Truth. Anyone who would appeal to the Corinthians as an excuse for apostasy and/or for remaining in an apostate church should be ashamed.

Conclusion

In appealing for good brethren to leave bad churches, I am not encouraging “sheep-stealing.” I am simply encouraging godly men and women to have the courage of their convictions and to make loyalty to the Lord and His Truth their priority. Although it may require sacrifice, the Lord’s command to them is: “Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4).

[Note: I wrote the MS for and it originally appeared in a slightly different form as an “Editorial Perspective” in the February 2005 issue of *The Gospel Journal*, of which I was editor at the time.]