

Spiritual Anticlimaxes

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Introduction

An anticlimax is a reversal of direction, thought, or status from the superior to the inferior or from the sublime to the ridiculous. In our days of modern, well-equipped, and technologically advanced automobiles, the suggestion that we return to traveling by horse and buggy would be an anticlimax. The behaviors of people in religious matters frequently demonstrate this phenomenon. One of the most obvious anticlimaxes was the determination of first-century Jewish Christians to retain parts of or to revert entirely to the Law of Moses. Much of what Paul wrote addressed this grievous and spiritually fatal problem (Gal. 4:9; 5:1-4; et al.). Such conduct represented a step backward – an exchange of the faultless for the “not faultless” (Heb. 8:7), which constituted a deadly anticlimax. Some of these anticlimaxes have lured many of the Lord’s people in more modern times into them, which entrapment poses a grave danger.

Exchanging the “Perfect” for that Which Is “in Part”

In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul discusses the proper use, misuse, duration, and purpose of miraculous spiritual gifts. They were to “cease” when “that which is perfect” came (13:8, 10). At the time Paul wrote those words, the brethren did not have the full, written revelation available, so they had to rely on men with such spiritual gifts as prophecy and knowledge to supply the revelation. However, these gifts are described as “in part” (not complete) (v. 9). The time would come when they would have “that which is perfect,” contrasted with those things (the gifts) that were “in part.”

When the “perfect” came, the “in part” gifts would cease. *That which is perfect* is a reference to the completed written revelation of God’s Word. If the gifts were to cease because they were no longer necessary upon completion of the revelation, then, by implication, the gifts served the purpose of confirming the Word. What Paul implies, the Lord states explicitly (Mark 16:20), as does the writer of Hebrews 2:3-4. (Since the gifts were for the purpose of confirming the incomplete Word and they were to cease when the Word was completed, it follows that, if the gifts are still active, the Word is not yet complete. Therefore, to be consistent, those who

claim the ability to work miracles should still be giving us revelation as authoritative as what we already have in the Bible.)

The miraculous spiritual gifts represented an immature, childhood period of the church (1 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 4:13–15)—like scaffolding around a building to be removed as unnecessary when it is completed. Those who claim to work miracles today deny the Bible doctrine that the gifts have ceased. Not only are all such claims unbiblical and absurd, they are also anticlimactic. We have the completed revelation of God’s Word (Jude 3; Rev. 22:18–19), which is all-sufficient for every spiritual need (Acts 20:32; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:3). To desire the miraculous gifts is to step backward. It is, whether or not intended, an attempt to replace the perfect Word with the mere vehicles that produced the Word. It implies the insufficiency and incompleteness of God’s revelation.

Millions naively clamor after the television deceivers who claim to perform miracles. Additionally, various sects believe that miracles and signs are yet available to them (especially what they call “tongues”). Sadder still is the fact that some who were once brethren have been thus deceived (e.g., Pat Boone, Don Finto, and Jim Bevis). Others (Rubel Shelly, Jim Beam, Carroll Osburn, et al.) have not joined or started their own Pentecostal denominations (as have some others), but their fellowship with and endorsement of those who claim miraculous abilities equals the same behavior. Those who seek to revert to the age of miracles (long since ceased) when we have the completed revelation from God, embroil themselves in a grievous and fatal anticlimax.

Exchanging the Spiritual Kingdom for a Material Kingdom

The Jews of Jesus’ time totally misunderstood the kingdom prophecies. They had their hopes set on the revival of Israel’s national power and glory. However, the prophets did not prophesy such a kingdom. The kingdom they prophesied would never be destroyed but would stand forever (Dan. 2:44); it thus could not possibly be an earthly, material, political institution. The Lord was born to reign over that **eternal** kingdom (Luke 1:32–33), not an earthly one. His contemporaries sought to force such a crown upon Him, but He refused it (John 6:15). Rather, He identified His church with the kingdom that would come in their lifetime (Mat. 16:18–19, 28; Mark 9:1) rather than one to come at distant future time.

He sought to clarify the misconceptions of the apostles through His several kingdom parables. As the end neared, however, they were yet vying for places of authority in an

anticipated material kingdom (Mark 10:37). Even later, they apparently were still confused about its nature (Acts 1:6). Christ declared the spiritual nature of His kingdom to Pontius Pilate (John 18:36). The apostles, with the Holy Spirit's coming on Pentecost (John 14:26; 16:13; Acts 2:1-4, 16-21, 33), were made to understand that the church and the kingdom of Christ on earth are one (Mat. 16:18-19; Heb. 12:23, 28; et al.).

As they preached the existence of the kingdom, many Jews (Acts 2:41; 3:4; 6:1, including many priests [Acts 6:7]) were able to see this and were converted. The Samaritans likewise responded to the preaching of the kingdom (Acts 8:12), which was included in "preaching the Word" (v. 4) and proclaiming "the Christ" (v. 5). When people obeyed the Gospel, they were added to the church (Acts 2:47) and translated into the kingdom (Col.1:13)—equivalent statements.

Most of Protestantism today, as the Jews of old, interprets all of the kingdom prophecies as material and political. According to the modern literal kingdom advocates, Christ originally came to resurrect David's earthly kingdom, but the Jews thwarted His plan, crucifying Him. In place of the failed literal kingdom, God substituted the church till Christ could come again. Upon His return He will allegedly establish a political kingdom in Jerusalem and reign for one thousand years. A restoration of the Law of Moses will characterize this millennial reign.

This material kingdom plan is anticlimactic in the extreme. It is amazing that so many millions have been deceived by it. Among other things, it replaces the eternal, unshakeable spiritual kingdom (Dan. 2:44; Heb. 12:28) with a material one that will last only a millennium. It replaces the perfect, sin-cleansing blood of the Lamb of God (John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:18-20) with the imperfect, powerless blood of bulls and goats (Heb. 10:1-4). It replaces the substance of the more excellent way (8:6) with that which was only a shadow and copy of the true (vv. 3-5; 10:1). It replaces the faultless covenant with one that was not "faultless" (8:7-13). It replaces the glorious body and bride of Christ for which He died (Eph. 1:22-23, 4:4; 5:23-25) with a mere political domain. Premillennialism is a system of theology that is egregiously and fatally anticlimactic.

Exchanging the Truth for Error

As I travel about, brethren who have come out of religious error often ask: "How can those who 'grew up in the church' and once knew (and even preached) the Truth abandon it for error as so many have done?" This phenomenon perplexes me as much as it does them, and I

have no absolute answer. I know, however, that such conduct is one of the greatest possible anticlimaxes – perhaps the ultimate exchange of one’s birthright for a mess of pottage (Gen. 25:29–34). I can think of brethren – elders and preachers included – who several years ago were strong in the Truth, but who have joined the ranks of the Lord’s enemies. The families of some of these had been staunch saints for four generations or more, but they have broken that noble chain.

Such folk now deny the need or possibility of restoring and maintaining the primitive church. They apparently can no longer conceive of any religious body, including the Lord’s church, apart from a denominational structure. Some of these have left the church and joined a denomination; others have started their own denominations. Most, however, have elected hypocritically to stay “within” the church in order to make it over after their plans. Sad to say, many complacent brethren have shown themselves all too willing to acquiesce to such Pied Pipers.

Some congregations that were once known for their doctrinal soundness have been prostituted by false teachers and failed shepherds but for one last thing – they have not been honest enough to remove *Church of Christ* from the signs that identify their property. And what shall we say of the educational institutions that thousands of faithful brethren sacrificed dearly to found and/or have sacrificed to keep going, but which now are traitors to the Truth they were founded to propagate? The administrations and professors in these institutions are culpable, but the ultimate guilt rests upon their Trustees and Boards, who have failed to fulfill the charters set forth by their founders. Could the founders or early administrators of almost any of these universities be resurrected they would likely disavow their beloved schools.

All these have heard the siren song of sectarianism, compromise, and culture. As to **why** they now listen more intently to the murky voices of error than to the clear voice of Truth, the reasons likely vary. Some, especially in academia, have admitted to peer pressure. They cannot bear to be ridiculed as “narrow-minded” or “unscholarly” by their professional non-Christian associates. They have allowed modernists to convince them that one cannot both be a “scholar” and simply a Christian who accepts the Bible as the inerrant revelation from God. Some have allowed pride to sway them. While we must all guard against vainglory; I think I have never met a humble liberal. They consistently manifest condescension and elitism. Family ties and close friendships have swayed some. Money has been a major factor, and there are likely many other causes.

Paul clearly described them as:

...lovers of self...boastful, haughty...headstrong, puffed up...; holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof: from these also turn away.... Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. And even as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also withstand the truth. Men corrupted in mind, reprobate concerning the faith (2 Tim. 3:1-8).

These who were once our brethren came to the point where they “received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 The. 2:10). Such now, in their unbelief of the Truth, stand condemned before God (v. 12). As did some in Corinth, so are some now “corrupting the word of God” (2 Cor. 2:17). They are “walking in craftiness...handling the word of God deceitfully” (4:2). They are servants of Satan who “fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works” (11:15). They have learned to use well “the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error” (Eph. 4:14). Modern turncoats are religious clones of some first-century Romans; the apostle is specific about how to deal with them:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent (Rom. 16:17-18).

Let us never become complacent and think that we are beyond being tempted by such spiritual adultery: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

Conclusion

If the faithful would avoid these destructive anticlimaxes, we should burn into our hearts the following and similar exhortations:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58.)

And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not (Gal. 6:9).

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the March 2002 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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