

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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THE DEBASED CHURCH

Looking back in time for a moment, it was in the early sixties a milestone in the road to wherever we were going was passed when the Philadelphia mint began manufacturing 25-cent pieces that contained about a penny's worth of silver. Now most of our pocket money and what little change we get back out of the government reserve notes is worth little more than the paper the notes are printed on, has a clear sound of "plunk" instead of the old fashioned silver pieces that had the clear sound of "clink". Much rubbish has been written and spoken about the reason for the change, but the truth is our currency has become so debased that precious metals can no longer be used. National Newspaper correspondent Richard Starnes at that time wrote: "This is a familiar indication of the decline of a nation. Experienced travelers automatically understand much about a country which exchanges their currency for a handful of base metal discs that go plunk and not clink. If the piasters are made of aluminum, you can bet your last hard earned dollar that the streets will be teeming with starved urchins who want to take you home to meet their beautiful sixteen year old sister. There is a whole schedule of decay that goes with tin money." He then goes on to list such decadences as: "national lotteries, self-centered preoccupation with the accumulation of pseudo wealth, riots in our large cities, a collapse of sexual mores, crowds marching in endless protest, students who don't study, teachers who don't teach and parents who don't rear their children."

The hollow sound of our money is only a symptom of the sickness of our society, and this sickness is reflected in the hollow sound of the soul of the modern church which is heard in many aspects of life which it touches and with which it associates itself. Just as the world has exchanged the precious metal in our coins for the hollow sound of copper, the modern day church has lost its sense of spiritual values in life itself and has exchanged the pearl of great price for costume jewelry. This, however, is no new thing, religious people's sense of values have always been distorted and debased. In II Chronicles 9:15 we are told King Solomon made 500 shields of Gold using 900 shekels of gold and placed them in the house of God. When his son, Rehoboam, became king, the king of Egypt came against him and "took away everything, even the golden shields which Solomon had made, then Rehoboam made shields of brass in their place" (II Chronicles 12:9, 10).

In Luke 21:1-6 Jesus points this out in an effort to impress the seriousness of distorted values upon his disciples. We read: "And he looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And he said, 'Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.' And while some were talking about the temple, that was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, he said 'As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn

down.'" This points out the fact that God's measurement of the value of things does not agree with ours. Success today is measured, even in the church, in terms of dollars and cents, power and prestige, and the ability to advance in that which the world has to offer. Jesus, on the other hand, laid stress upon the fact that the abundance of life does not consist of things which perish, but the eternal values which live beyond the grave. Our trouble today is that we can do everything for ourselves, and what we can't do for ourselves the government will do for us. God then becomes optional in such a society. This was the idolatry of both Israel in the Old Testament and an apostate church in the New Testament and is with us in the modern church today. Deuteronomy 32:15, 17: "But Jeshurun (Israel) waxed fat, and kicked; you are waxed fat, you are grown thick, you are covered with fatness; then he forsook God who made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation. They sacrificed to demons, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up." Jeremiah 2:5, 13: "They went far from me and walked after emptiness and became empty...they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cistern, broken cisterns that can hold no water." Revelation 3:17, 18: "You say, 'I am rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." This is still the idolatry of the modern debased church. In his book *Idols For Destruction* Herbert Schlossberg has a chapter on "Idols of Religion" in which he says "religious institutions become an active agent in promotion of idolatry or even become an idol itself as people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship."

The modern church has debased the sense of Scriptural worship and mixed it with the objects of worship. Just as there was renewal of our money system when our coins were debased there has been a lot of talk recently about "worship renewal" but a lot of confusion about just what it is that needs to be renewed. Jack Reese, dean of the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University wrote in *The Christian Standard*: "My problem is not that people desire worship renewal. Rather it is the assumption among many, that such renewal is primarily about music. If only our songs were more celebratory, if only we chose more relevant songs, sang more enthusiastically, had better worship leaders, recruited more musicians, or wrote greater hymns, then surely our worship world be better." The problem he is addressing is relative to what is happening in churches on Sunday mornings. Our problem is not to try to change what we are doing but to understand what we should be doing.

Jesus makes a terrible indictment of religious leaders in his day by saying "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of man, neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men" (Mark 7:7, 8 quoting from Isaiah 29:13). If anyone knew about vain and useless worship it was Isaiah. He opens his prophecy with a vivid

description of the useless and empty worship of the religious Jews, which he says, God hates. Much that is called worship today has been debased by adding tradition, and just because participants feel good about it and think it is God blessed does not make it so. The great failure of worship today, especially worship music is a failure to worship God as He has revealed Himself in the story of redemption. Many worship God in the image of the familiar, the emotional, the entertaining and the trivial. This is debased worship.

There's a hollow sound in our churches today. The silver of our spiritual nature has been exchanged for copper and the copper has become tarnished with the power of materialism and relevancy. We have whittled the beam of God's revelation down to fit into a neat two hour pigeon hole on Sunday morning that entertains us and makes us feel good about ourselves. Our faith has become such that it is worn to church services then discarded as easily as any other garment which might hinder our freedom of movement. We have somehow not been able to grasp the fact that the growth in spiritual things and the building of the kingdom depends not upon the services on Sunday in the church building, but the service on weekdays in the world. That which the world needs to see is not massive buildings and big parking lots but big men...men of faith. The stately structure and massive edifice mean nothing as long as it is filled with people of little faith. Thus Jesus pointed out to the disciples that that the massive stones that made up the temple complex could not stay the destruction coming upon it because of the corruption of the rituals on the inside of the building. That which the world needs to hear in neither the stilted anthems from the traditional choir accompanied by the expensive pipe organ, nor the hootenannies masquerading as praise services accompanied by deafening drum sounds and brass bands playing off key as loud as acoustically possible, but the song in the heart of the person who knows there is more to this matter of Christianity than what they do on Sunday morning. That which will give fallen mankind the faith to look beyond the pessimism and distress of these troubled times is not the copper coated emotionalism that equates twenty minutes inspirational gibberish with the gospel, good feelings with the Holy Spirit and empty clichés with preaching, rather, the simple scriptural revelation of Jesus Christ which is so plain a child can understand and so simple the way a fairing man may know. Walter Horton in his book: *Can Christianity Save Civilization* wrote: "Any culture disintegrates when its inner core of religious conviction gets too much out of harmony with its outer shell of material culture and technique...advanced civilizations lose their heart when religion becomes a department of life, instead of being the center and source of life". The debased church has come to be regarded more as a thing of convenience than conviction. Ease and comfort are its watchwords.

If history teaches us anything it shows us that Christianity given ease, luxury, and applause, it dies amid the scoffs of the scornful. When the ring of reality is gone there remains only a hollow echo. Stone, brick and mortar carved into glorious shapes is beautiful. The disciples boasted of the greatness of the temple, but Jesus showed that these things would soon be destroyed, and if they did not present an equally strong, mortared faith, there would be nothing left but an outward shell for those who looked only upon these surface things. Ornate pews and plastic pulpits fashioned into modern styles are appealing. Modern music, praise bands, air conditioned auditoriums, and neon welcome signs are enticing. But these things are not Christianity and can never bring joy and happiness to the heart.

A debased monetary system is indicative of a debased society that begets a debased church; the result of a debased church is a debased revelation and the result of a debased revelation is to "distort the gospel of Christ" and be "accursed" (Gr. Anathema) before God (Gal. 1:7-9). The gold of the purity of God's revelation has been tarnished with the brass of tradition, distortion, substitution, speculation and outright denial. Jesus said of the Jews in his day: "Neglecting the commandment of God you hold to the tradition of men. You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:8, 9). The Apostle Paul said to the Galatians: "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel...there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6, 7), he then calls down a curse on any who preach a gospel not in accordance with the word of God (ver.8, 9). F.F. Bruce in *The Gospel and Epistles of John* wrote: "I am convinced that false belief holds the minds of men and women in bondage. Truth liberates them."

Even Pagans whose only revelation from God was, not His written law, but His revelation in creation, were condemned when they debased what God had revealed to them. "That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom. 1:19, 21). Their debasement was: "they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than God...they exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural...they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer." Their punishment was: "God gave them over" to do as they pleased and were said to be "worthy of death" (Rom. 1:22-32).

In James. D. G. Dunn's significant work *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* in his comments of this passage has a note relative to humanities debasing God: "The human creatures need their fulfillment as creatures. If not God, then something altogether baser. Without God they become subservient to their own desires. It is their relation to God (bearing His image) which makes them 'like God.' *Without that they have only substitutes.*"

The debased church has lost its sense of good and evil. It has mistaken success for righteousness and comfort for holiness, good feelings with the Holy Spirit and empty clichés with preaching. Biblical faith is replaced by a hybrid faith mixed with convenient parts of traditional Christianity and a substitute of secularism, humanism, materialism and hedonism. It is a cross-less, Scriptural-less, Spirit-less kind of religion that has no resemblance to the church revealed in the book of Acts. Like Rehoboam's substitute the magnificence of gold is exchanged for cheapness and gaudiness of bronze. It gave the appearance of gold, but was a counterfeit. Israel knew the gold was gone and what was left was brass, but were satisfied with the substitution. Also true of debased churches.

