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"The Mystery of Iniquity Doth Already Work"

C. MERVYN MAXWELL

The speed with which early Christianity tobogganed into apostasy takes one's breath away. Most of the characteristics of later Catholicism were plainly in evidence for a long time before the rise of Constantine in A.D. 306.

In fact, even before the apostles died, things were going wrong. John knew of Christians who denied that Jesus had a real human body. He called them "anti-christs." (1 John 4:1-4.) When he examined the early Christian churches in Asia Minor, which were to symbolize the church throughout its history, he found that already in Sardis there were only a few members whose garments were undefiled (Revelation 3:4); in Thyatira he saw that Christians were committing spiritual fornication (chapter 2:20-22); in Ephesus, that they had lost their first love (verse 4); and in Laodicea, that they were lukewarm. (Chapter 3:15.)

Jude warned against roving Christians who claimed to have a message from God, but who were really clouds without rain. (Jude 12.) Paul warned against similar teachers who were undermining people's faith and leading whole families astray. (2 Timothy 2:18; Titus 1:11.) In fact, Paul was so bitterly harassed by Jewish-Christian converts who travelled behind him preaching a gospel of works that he cried out in reference to them, "Beware of dogs!" Philippians 3:2.

Thus when the first-century church is described as "pure" or symbolized as a rider on a white horse, the reference is to be taken as describing the doctrine of the apostles or, perhaps, the comparative purity of the church in contrast to the world around it or in contrast to the later, more fully developed apostasy. The church of the first century, though wonderful in many respects, was far from perfect.

Process of Apostasy

The process of apostasy so soon begun, ran on apace in the second and third centuries, until by the time of Constantine (306-337) the pattern of future Catholicism was already well set.

The doctrine of the condition of man in death was widely distorted in the second and third centuries. Although around A.D. 170, Tatian, in many ways an eccentric, insisted that the righteous do indeed remain dead until the second coming of Christ, his view was not representative of his age. Irenæus held a more common position that the "sleep" of the dead is not unconsciousness but is separation from God in "an invisible place." ("Against Heresies," Vol. 31.2, in ANF 1,560.) The Apocalypse of Peter, accepted before A.D. 170 in some quarters as a part of the Bible, portrayed the

wicked dead as already suffering in hell. And Origen in the early third century went so far as to teach that people who die as sinners not only continue to be conscious, but also receive a second chance after death.

Of course, Christians did not accept every pagan notion about life after death. They continued to make the significant distinction that faith in Christ was a necessary condition for happiness in the afterlife, and they continued to believe in a need for the resurrection of the body at the second coming. But almost universally the early Christians came to believe that the souls of the dead continue to live. In fact, by the early fourth century, Eusebius, the father of church history, called the belief that the dead are asleep "a doctrine foreign to the truth," and alleged that it was held only by Christians who had been "deluded."—"Church History," VI. 37; Loeb ed. II, 91.

In view of the withering attacks levelled by Judaizers against righteousness by faith within Paul's lifetime, it is not surprising that this key doctrine faded from the picture very early. Several early documents—drawing the idea, it may be, from the apocryphal Book of Tobit—attest the early emergence of the belief that daily sins were to be atoned for not so much by Christ as through the works of one's hands. Faith in God still helped martyrs to face death and ordinary Christians to face life, but faith in Christ alone for salvation was all too soon forgotten.

A misunderstanding of Hebrews 6:4-6 led many early Christians to think that if a person committed such serious sins as apostasy and adultery after he had been baptized, he could never be forgiven.

As might be expected, this interpretation proved to be too rigorous. People either were discouraged by it or ignored it. One man who opposed it was a Christian in Rome named Hermas, who wrote a book called "The Shepherd," a curious little work that enjoyed a wide circulation for many years. His burden was that the church ought to forgive Christians who commit adultery—but only once, of course; to ask for more he knew would be hopeless. Yet even Hermas allowed that forgiveness should not be extended to Christians who apostatized in time of persecution and worship idols. (Similitude 9.)

Callistus, Bishop of Rome from A.D. 217-223, became the first bishop known to

have developed a regular way in which Christian adulterers could be forgiven. He said that since Noah's ark contained unclean animals as well as clean ones, repentant adulterers should not be denied church membership; they could be forgiven, he explained, by "a spiritual man," meaning a bishop. Later, in the third century, under conditions to be described next week, Cyprian of North Africa and other bishops devised a plan whereby even Christians who reverted to idolatry could be restored—likewise through the decision of bishops. Both Cyprian and Callistus, in defending the forgiveness of sins by bishops, referred to powers supposedly conferred by Jesus on Peter.

Corrupt as it was rapidly becoming, the church was by no means wholly bad; consequently it sought to safeguard its standards even while devising ways to forgive its offenders. It offered forgiveness, but made it difficult. A repentant sinner was required to perform exhomologesis, public confession. In extreme cases this meant appearing outside church every week for years dressed in sackcloth and ashes, imploring the church members' prayers on one's behalf. Further years of lying prostrate inside the church doors, then of standing at the back inside the main sanctuary, might follow. Only after extended years of humiliation might a serious offender be allowed to come to the front and partake once more of the Lord's Supper.

Before the time of Constantine, justification through Christ by faith had given way to forgiveness through bishops by penance.

In spite of the endorsement that the New Testament gives to Christian marriage (Matthew 19:6; Ephesians 5:22, 23; Hebrews 13:4), second-century Christian novels popularized virginity as far more pleasing to God than marriage. The story of Paul and Thecla, for example, written by a bishop around the year 180, taught that Paul was not persecuted on his missionary journeys for preaching Christ, but for separating families! Thecla was presented to Christian youth as a heroine because when she heard Paul preach she broke her engagement and lived the rest of her life unmarried.

Tertullian of North Africa complained that marriage led only to crying babies, anyway. And if a man had a legal right to marry once, he insisted, he certainly had better not marry again if his first wife died, for the good woman would still be alive in heaven.

Thus the stage was set very early for the later Catholic practice of refusing the clergy the right to marry.

The exaltation of tradition above Scripture, the doctrine of apostolic succession, and the supremacy of the church in Rome, familiar attributes of modern Catholicism, were all apparent before A.D. 300. More will be said about these teachings in later articles.

Suffice it to say that the Sabbath was, as might be expected, among the earliest doctrines to be modified or abandoned in

Excerpts from a Letter

[Editor's Note.—Pastor Pierson has recently completed an extensive trip which included many of our world divisions. In this letter to our leaders around the world he tells of some of the interesting facts and stories he has gathered from different parts of the world field. We are indebted to Pastor L. C. Naden for passing this on to us.]

many places. In view of the special place God intended the Sabbath to fill in Christian sanctification, it would have been strange indeed if the enemy of souls had not attacked the Sabbath very early. As Pastor James White acknowledged in the first Adventist periodical ("The Present Truth," No. 1, 1850), evidence for Sunday observance can be traced back almost to apostolic times.

Justin Martyr is a contemporary witness that "orthodox" Christians in Rome as early as A.D. 155, and perhaps in Ephesus as early as A.D. 135, held the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments in low esteem. Justin allowed that the Sabbath was all right in its place. It was given to the Jews because they were so wicked, and needed it. But Abraham, he said, was saved without the Sabbath, so why should Christians today observe it? Christ has brought us Christians a new law that has taken the place of the old one promulgated on Mount Sinai. ("Dialogue," x-xii, xviii, in ANF 1, 199-203.)

The Sabbath was not everywhere despised, of course. Bishop Irenæus, who wrote a few decades after Justin, certainly did not despise the Sabbath. Yet even he, devout bishop that he was, considered the keeping of the literal seventh-day Sabbath to be unnecessary. In his "Proof of the Apostolic Preaching," chapter 96, he said that the seventh-day Sabbath was no longer needed, since Christians keep Sabbath every day when they act justly toward their fellow men and worship God in the temples of their hearts.

Paul called the apostasy at work in his own day the "mystery of iniquity," or, as the Revised Standard Version puts it, the "mystery of lawlessness"; and the evidence is that God's law was attacked within the Christian church even within the first century. "The Great Controversy" says that in his own lifetime Paul saw "creeping into the church, errors that would prepare the way for the development of the Papacy."—Page 49.

When Roman Catholics claim that the Catholic Church reaches back to the days of the apostles, we must, in one sense, agree. In the mystery of lawlessness at work in apostolic times the Catholic Church may trace its birth; and in the false teachers that Paul said would arise like wolves to tear the flock (Acts 20: 29), it may find the nurses who gave it suck.

In the little day of earth's history, it is vesper time. The people of all the world are finding their pews in the cathedral of apostasy, there to wonder after the beast and worship him. The warnings of prophecy uttered long before our day are being fulfilled before our eyes.

In such a time as this, modern Adventists must keep alert. And because Catholicism today, in spite of its striking "renewal," is still so much the product of what it was yesterday, it is hoped that this series on Catholic history will help to clarify the issues that face the Christian world of the twentieth century.

(To be continued)

Dear Brethren,

This is not an urgent letter, but it contains some thrilling news. . . . If you have a stack of work on that desk of yours, just toss this aside until you have a few spare minutes to relax and enjoy a little good news that will encourage your hearts as it has mine. . . .

Australasia. One can never be the same after spending a few weeks with Pastor Naden and his fine group of dedicated leaders in "the onward fields" of Australasia. . . . It took the brethren in Australasia fifty-eight years to reach the 20,000 mark (1943). Now they report 80,000—a doubled membership in ten years, and with the programme of soul-winning they have laid for 1968, the tempo is bound to increase. What a thrill to travel with Brethren Naden, Maberly and Howse, and visit some of the island missions and well-known centres in Australia and New Zealand. Imagine the Health Food plants providing millions of dollars over the years to the budget of the mission fields! The brethren "down under" believe in missions and, under the rich blessing of God, there is progress in every department of the work. I believe the day is not far distant when annually the Australasian baptisms will surpass the 10,000 mark! (It may not be in 1968, but I can hear Pastor Naden saying, "Amen!")

Central Europe. Pastor Gmehling has undergone surgery recently but writes that he is "on the mend" and that his two fine fellow officers—Brethren Fleck and Bremer—are keeping the work on the move. The brethren are working and praying to "turn the tide" in Germany, and this past year there were a number of the conferences in the gain column. In the South German Union, baptisms showed a gain of seventy over 1966, and the Hessian Conference president writes of gains in his field and a new evangelistic fervour possessing his workers. A new division evangelistic team should add impetus to the soul-winning programme in Germany.

Far East. What a division! My heart is still warm as I bask in the afterglow of their division council and what I saw and felt while I was there for a few weeks in November and December. Workers, laymen, preachers, teachers, administrators, departmental leaders, institutional workers—everyone is on fire in the Far East. Two servicemen, one an American and one a Korean, have completed an effort in Korea with some eighty decisions for the message. . . . Pastor Milton Lee opened in Taipei recently with every one of the 600 seats in the hall filled. Pastor Eldridge writes in his usual courageous manner. God bless

him, the work moves forward in the Far East despite the troubles and tensions. I would not be surprised with 25,000 baptisms during the year 1968!

Inter-America. Pastor W. W. Fordham, from the General Conference Regional Department, recently opened an effort in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The response has been electrifying. . . . The workers are visiting in 800 homes. Mexico has the message broadcast over seventy-three radio stations. In Mexico City, twelve evangelistic meetings are in progress simultaneously and over 4,000 homes are being visited. Pastor Powers writes that Inter-America is going all out for soul-winning. I am looking forward to my little effort in Jamaica this summer. I have no doubt Inter-America will reach the goal of 100,000 baptisms and a church membership of 270,000 by General Conference Session time!

Middle East. Despite the tensions and turmoil that inevitably follow as the aftermath of war, the brethren in the Middle East are moving ahead courageously. Pastor Webster writes of two evangelists holding evangelistic campaigns in El Husn and Irbif, two cities in Jordan wedged in between the frontiers of Israel, Jordan and Syria. In the initial stages of the meetings attendance was so large that double sessions were necessary. . . . During the latter part of 1967, fourteen newspapers participated in providing 1,175 inches of space covering the different activities of our Middle East programme, featuring the welfare work of our church in Jordan, the 5-Day Plan in Ankara, and the Quadrennial Council in Beirut, a new day as far as publicity in the public press is concerned. . . .

Northern Europe. Pastor Eva and his fine fellow officers are giving a strong spiritual and evangelistic lead in Northern Europe. There is a "going in the tops of the mulberry trees" in some of these European lands where the work has gone slowly. I have been encouraged with the "Britain-on-the-Move" approach Pastor B. E. Seton is bringing to his leadership in the United Kingdom. The Irish Mission baptized three times as many candidates in 1967 as the recent yearly average. Wales has done twice as well as in recent years. In Sweden there is an encouraging upswing in baptisms. Forty-six evangelistic campaigns are in full swing in Poland. In Eastern Nigeria our folk face real problems. Money cannot be sent in and the war has disrupted the churches, so workers have taken a 33½ per cent cut in salaries that are already too low. One pastor has lost his life in the fighting. . . .

South America. The news from South America is constantly thrilling. Pastor

(Please turn to page 14)