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THE TWO WAYS OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

CHAPTER 2

THE START OF IT ALL

"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.....And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven."

Acts 2:1,5

The day of Pentecost was waiting to "fully come" for a long time. Every year the feast of Pentecost, also called the feast of weeks, was celebrated in Jerusalem. But, in the year 30 A.D., a very special Pentecost arrived and marked the start of a new era- an era the world had never seen before. Not since the creation of Adam and Eve had the world witnessed such an outpouring of the spirit of God. With the fall of Adam and Eve, mankind had been left to drift through a spiritually designed world without a spiritual nature. He was in desperate need of a redeemer who could pay the price for his redemption and reinvigorate him with a new nature.

A Short Review From Adam Until Christ

Four thousand years had gone by since Adam and the results of man's lack of a godly nature are clearly seen in the Old Testament. Cain killed Able. Mankind became so wicked that only one man was left who trusted in God, Noah, and God sent a flood to clean house. Shortly thereafter, Nimrod shows up on the scene with the intention of leading all mankind away from God. His efforts are foiled by a cataclysmic division of the nations (the formation of the continents) and an equally permanent establishment of diverse languages. Nimrod's designs were foiled.

The clock ticked on. Two thousand years had passed since Adam when Abraham arrived on the scene. He looked for a city whose builder and maker was God and God promised him that in his seed all nations of the world would be blessed. Israel thought they were the fulfillment of that promise because they were the descendants of Abraham. They were not the fulfillment of the promise! They strove by their human effort to bless themselves but never rose to the grand design of being a blessing to all the nations of the world.

No wonder. Israel as a nation was also devoid of a spiritual nature. Although God placed his spirit from time to time upon the Old Testament prophets so that by them He could talk with the descendants of Abraham, the descendants did not listen well. Their ears transmitted what they heard to a faulty brain that had difficulty understanding and interpreting a spiritual message.

And so, the clock ticked on. Another two thousand years passed by as Moses came on the scene, then Joshua, then the judges and the kings. The kingdom of Israel was split in two after the death of Solomon, ten tribes going one direction, the two remaining going another. Both factions ended up in captivity sooner or later. The nation that God chose to be a nation of priests, was scattered to the four winds.

In the four thousand years from Adam to the coming of the promised seed, mankind occasionally had a glimpse of what blessings God would bring when man believed Him, but those times were rare indeed. For

the most part, man just drifted. He wandered through a spiritual world without a spiritual nature. Then came the promised seed, promised first to Eve and two thousand years later to Abraham. His name was Jesus Christ. He came to the other "seeds" of Abraham. By the time of His coming, a remnant from the dispersion had returned to the land of their fathers and Herod The Great was busy having the Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem.

In the two thousand years or so from Abraham to Jesus Christ, the descendants of Abraham were enslaved by the power of Egypt, and delivered from that enslavement through Moses. They were led into the "Promised Land" and about one thousand years before Christ, Solomon built The Temple which focused their identity and their ambitions.

That Temple was destroyed and the descendants of Abraham were led into captivity by their northern enemies, Babylonia and Assyria. About five hundred years after the first Temple was built, Zechariah and Haggai oversaw the rebuilding of it and Ezra and Nehemiah then consolidated and strengthened the community on a religious basis. In 165 B.C., after the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Maccabees came to power in Israel and a century later the country finally lost its independence as it passed into Roman control after the siege of Pompey in 63 B.C.

Twenty six years later, Jerusalem was again besieged, this time by Herod The Great. In about 20 B.C. he began rebuilding the Temple. It would be built on a larger and grander scale than ever before but would take over eighty years to complete. It was completed shortly before Titus (not the Titus to whom Paul wrote an epistle) destroyed it for the final time in 70 A.D.. For all its glory, Herod's Temple lacked the essential ingredient. The Arc of the Covenant was missing in the Holy of Holies as was the shechinah cloud. In Herod's Temple, the Holy of Holies was empty!

Herod the Great also had all the members of the Sanhedrin killed after he came to power, and by doing so he destroyed the hereditary and life long nature of the High Priesthood. No longer did the sons of faithful Zadok preside over the priesthood of Israel. Instead, money and intrigue determined who would be High Priest, and, in all, twenty eight High Priests filled the office in one hundred and six years of Herodian rule. The Hasmonians, in the one hundred fifteen years before Herod came to power, had only eight High Priests.

By the time that Jesus Christ came, political intrigue dominated the Temple rather than godliness. And, the Temple dominated Israel as a nation. Everything from money to welfare to public works to government to the Sanhedrian came under the authority of the High Priest. And, on average, the Herodian High Priests lasted less than four years in power. Such was the scandalous nature of the nation and the land into which Jesus was born.

The Promised Seed

Jesus Christ was the unique seed promised by God to Abraham. And all the man-made traditions and rituals, developed between the time of the promise and the time of its fulfillment, could not add too nor take from the perfection of God's complete fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. Jesus Christ was that perfect fulfillment of the promise. In Jesus Christ, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That blessing began when the day of Pentecost was "fully come".

Jesus Christ, the perfect man, came to a nation that appeared to be striving for perfection. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the divine record of how He was received. They each terminate with the story of His death and resurrection and that story is the centerpiece of each account.

The story in the Gospels culminates in the rejection of Jesus Christ by the nation of Israel, their will carried out in His crucifixion and God's will prevailing over the nations will in His resurrection. Jesus Christ became the High Priest forever, even though impostors continued to preside over Herod's temple until it was destroyed forty years later.

The book of Acts is the record of how the "seed" of Abraham- Jesus Christ- did indeed bless all the

nations of the earth. It begins with the "taking up" of Jesus Christ 40 days after his resurrection and ends about 32 years later with the imprisonment of Paul in Rome.

The Gospels cover a period from about 4 B.C. to 30 A.D.- 33 years. (From 1 B.C. to 1 A.D. is a period of only one year, not two years) Acts covers the period from 30 A.D. to 62 A.D.- 33 years. About eight years after the book of Acts terminates, in 70 A.D. Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus and his Roman legions, and Israel as a nation ceased to exist.

And so, in the Gospels, in the Acts Of The Apostles, and in Paul's Epistles, God's Word reveals to the Christian a complete picture regarding the 33 years that Jesus lived and the 40 years following His ascension, 73 years in all. Numerous people would have lived through that entire 73 year period and would have been witnesses to the many thrilling and miraculous events it contained.

It should be noted at the start that, while some of the books of the New Testament- particularly the books of James, II Peter, Jude and Revelation- have been disputed as to origin and godly authority, the book of Acts and Paul's Epistles have never been questioned by the church. It is primarily from these sources-The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's Epistles- that we gather our data to present a picture of the first century church which is both hopeful and tragic, exciting and discouraging. As one author said, "There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice." I trust that we can show that this statement was as true in the first century as it is today.

Our Primary Choice

There has always been a war between good and evil, between truth and error, between God's will and man's will. The opposition to God arises, as Paul says in Romans 1:25, because some "changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature (the thing made or the creation) more than the Creator who is blessed forever".

The Christians first choice in this war is to be an immediate disciple of Jesus Christ or to be a disciple of a disciple. Paul points out in I Corinthians 1:11-13 that contentions arose in Corinth over this very issue. Some said they were of Paul, some said they were of Apollos, some said they were of Cephas, while others said they were of Christ. Paul reminds them that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, not the messengers who bring His message. And this is the continuing problem- some would have us follow men rather than follow Jesus Christ.

Paul does instruct the church in Philippians 3:17 to be followers of him, but the word "followers" means to copy or imitate. He presents an entirely different picture than today's common conception of leader and follower. Today's "leaders", at least some of them, want people to follow, not imitate. Often times people may follow only at a distance. If they show too much promise they become a threat to the "leader". Paul presents himself as an example of the believers and encourages us to be examples also. He does not present himself as a ruler, as a military commander or as a dictator. He presents himself as a guide, as a teacher, as a brother. Love is his motive, not control over people.

The Christian has a choice. He worships and serves God or he worships and serves man. God's Word is his center of reference in life or some other authority is his center of reference. Paul uses the phrase "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" in II Corinthians 10:5 to explain what our mind set should be.

When the Christian worships and serves the creature more than the creator, he cuts himself off from the liberty wherewith Christ has made him free and becomes entangled in a massive system of bondage. Not only does he diminish the effectiveness of his own life, but he encourages usurpation and tyranny over the lives of others. He does this by giving his implicit approval and backing, to the man or organization he serves, allowing that man or organization to deceive others by virtue of the numbers of his-or its- followers. "See how many people I have following me" becomes the justifying statement for all the tyrant's actions. So it was in the first century church, and so it is today wherever one man assumes he is closer to the heart of God than other men.

The Scriptures reveal that it is impossible for a man to save himself by any amount of good works. For, in the nature of man, there is a basic flaw. One can climb only so far in trying to reach God's presence on the ladder of good works. For, it is a ladder with a rung missing. No matter how far a person climbs, he eventually hits the missing rung and falls back to the bottom. That is our flaw.

Our pattern of good works will consistently produce imperfection because of our very nature. God knew this and also knew that the only solution was a new nature; a nature without flaws, a nature that would allow us a place in God's presence without the necessity of climbing a broken ladder.

The Two Natures

Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone, provides our new nature. No other man, or doctrine, can lay claim to obedience or worship for bringing us into the presence of God.

To understand the "conflict of interest" in the first century church, it is crucial to understand these two natures. It is also crucial to understand who provides our new nature. And it is crucial to understand that the old nature does not vanish when the new nature arrives. It is always there, ready to do war with the new nature and ready to seduce us into leaving the presence of God.

When a person confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, he receives a new nature. As Paul says in II Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (creation): old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

The operative words are, "if any man be in Christ." Paul says, "as ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him." (Col. 2:6). We always have a choice how we are going to live, after we are "born again" as well as before. The old nature does not vanish with the advent of the new nature. Paul asks in Galatians 3:3, "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" He is talking to people who had received a new nature and yet wanted to walk by the old nature.

No end of confusion has resulted from a failure to recognize this reality. Christians are prone to dismiss the reality of the new birth in people who sin- especially if the sins are big black ones instead of little grey ones. To these people, a person becomes "unborn again" if he sins too badly or too often.

Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." The people who think that God takes back His gift do not understand the magnitude of God's love. In I Timothy 2:4 we read that God "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto a knowledge of the truth." God's will is to save every man. And, sooner or later, I believe He will accomplish His will!

In the mean time, there are "saved" and "unsaved". And, among the "saved" are two groups. One group consists of those who walk by the old nature. The other group consists of those who walk by the new nature. In the study of Acts that follows, I hope to show that many more people were "saved" than is commonly supposed. If I am successful, it will become clear that much of the resistance to Paul and those endeavoring to walk by the spirit came from within the church, and the center of that resistance was the Jerusalem Church.

If I succeed in showing a massive impact of Christianity on the world, to your satisfaction, you will be drawn to the conclusion that a far greater resistance to the "new nature" Christians came from the "old nature" Christians than was previously supposed. I do not doubt that the "unsaved" used the "old nature" Christians for their nefarious purposes, but I do not believe the "unsaved" could have accomplished very much without their aid.

The Result of Legalism

In Acts 15:5, about twenty years after the start of the church, we see that "certain of the sect of the Pharisees" were in the Jerusalem Church and had considerable influence. I call the Pharisees "ladder

makers". They well knew the rule book for making ladders: The Old Testament Law. In fact, by the time of Jesus Christ, they had so annotated and amplified this instruction on how to make ladders that the instruction book became more important than the ladder.

Being critical of other ladders went along with gaining a reputation of knowing the instruction book, and, as this game became more refined, of course the penalty for not following the instructions became more severe. No one seemed to notice anymore that none of the ladders were sufficient to climb to the presence of God. But, for sure, the Pharisees built higher ladders than anyone else. Perhaps they felt as modern men feel; "We are getting better and better, smarter and smarter, and, given enough time we will be perfect." They ran out of time! Jesus Christ came and severely threatened the entire industry of ladder making. He exposed both the ladders and the makers by saying, "I am the way, the truth, the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me!" (Jn 14:6).

One manifestation of the flaw in the old nature is that it severely dislikes having its work condemned. It would have been bad enough had Jesus Christ shown them Jacob's ladder upon which the angelic host ascended and descended from earth to the very presence of God. But, worse than that, He said, "I and my Father are one" and by making such a dramatic statement, He proclaimed that He was already in the presence of God and didn't need a ladder. He said that others could also be one with the Father and that He would gain access for them- without the help of any man-made ladder of good works, or earned righteousness, or meritorious achievement.

The "good works" ladder of the letter of the law, feasts, traditions, the sacrifice of animals and ordinances of touch not, taste not, handle not, gave way to the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Striving to be made perfect gave way to perfection itself. Thereafter, the bondage of the law would give way to the fruit of the spirit- love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (Gal.5:22,23). Paul would later amplify the vast difference between the good works concept of the Pharisees and "being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10) that was made possible by Jesus Christ. The one was bondage and death. The other was liberty and life.

The Result of the Resurrection

The leaders of Israel finally couldn't take it anymore and had Jesus Christ put to death. But, to prove that what Jesus Christ said was true, God raised him from the dead. Forty days later, after having been seen alive by many people- the twelve apostles and those with them, (Luke 24:33-36), the men on the road to Emmaus, (Luke 24:15), and over 500 people at one time, (I Cor. 15:6), as well as untold people in Galilee (Matt. 28:7)- he ascended. His instructions before the ascension were for the apostles and those with them to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father to be endued with "power from on high". (Luke 24:49).

Jesus told the people that He would not leave them comfortless, but would send them the Comforter who would guide them into all truth. When the day of Pentecost was "fully come", that Comforter did indeed come. A new age began. A new set of rules applied. And, the promise to Abraham was fulfilled as God poured out His blessings to the nations of the world through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Man once again had access to a new nature, a spiritual nature, the nature that Adam and Eve lost when they sinned. Only now, the spiritual nature would be given unconditionally rather than conditionally as with Adam and Eve. And, by receiving that nature man would revolutionize the world. Jesus Christ said, "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my father." (Jn. 14:12). He was not saying that we could do more than He could do. He was saying that we would be able to more than he was able to do before His death and resurrection. He would do more after His resurrection than He did before and the Christian would do more than Jesus Christ did before His death and resurrection. The statement in John 14:12 does not suggest that we would be superior in any way to Jesus Christ. But, "because I go unto My Father" the world would experience "greater works" than it had seen, even in Jesus life before the resurrection. Jesus Christ would do those works and the Christian would also do those works through His authority. As God's children, we would have the privilege of being Sons of God and servants of Jesus Christ. This privilege and the "greater

works" of Jesus Christ are what the book of Acts is all about.

The Ascension is where the book of Acts begins. The time, around 30 A.D.. The place, the City of the Temple, Jerusalem. Jesus Christ had been the Passover Lamb, slain just forty days earlier. But, God raised Him from the dead three days later and during the following thirty seven days, all Israel must have been alive with reports, rumors, expectation. "Is it true?" "Is Jesus Christ really the Messiah?" "Is He really risen from the dead?" "Who did you say saw him?" Such would have been the questions repeated and modified throughout the land as the Jews from all over the world waited for the day of Pentecost to FULLY COME!

Would Jesus Christ take over the duties of High Priest on that day? Would the King of Kings and Lord of Lords cast out the Herodian impostors? Would He deliver Israel from the iron fist of Rome? Would He set up a new kingdom in which righteousness reigned? Such would have been the thoughts and questions of the Apostles on the day of the Ascension as pictured in Acts 1.

Jesus told them it was not for them to know the times and the seasons which the Father had not revealed. But, He said, "Ye shall receive power after that the holy spirit is come upon you" (Acts 1:8) and ten short days later the Apostles began to see just how powerful this power was that Jesus said they would receive.



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