

STRAIGHTWAY

"And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him" [Mark 1:18].

CHRISTIAN PURITIES FELLOWSHIP

The Witness Outreach of Foundations Bible College
P.O. Box 1166 · Dunn, North Carolina 28335

VOLUME 29

MAY/JUNE 2001

NUMBER 4

The Fire Before the Rain

by Dr. H. T. Spence, President

Then the fire of the LORD fell . . . And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God (I Kings 18:38a, 39).

to identify God's enemies. No doubt there are those who wish the word never existed. When it does appear in conversation, it seems to "rock the boat" of the religious status quo.

How often do you hear the word *apostasy* mentioned from a pulpit today or from a lectern in a Christian school, college, or university? This term is becoming conspicuously absent in the preaching and writings of our younger Christian leaders and, sad to say, even among those who used the term in their preaching and writings twenty or thirty years ago. Apostasy is becoming one of those terms that church leaders no longer view relative. They have discarded it to the growing "unmentionable list" of inappropriate terms that were once a part of the arsenal

Nevertheless, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, the principle of apostasy is clearly delineated in Scriptures, especially in the context of the Endtime. Apostasy is part of the identification of the "mystery of iniquity" working in our times that will lead to the manifestation of the Antichrist himself. The term *apostasy* (from the Greek word *apostasia*) is a "defection" or a "revolt" and is translated "to forsake, to depart, or to fall away."

As these days increase in world apostasy, church leaders

are redefining the term merely to designate the growing powers of eastern religions or the growing influences of the cults such as Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Roman Catholicism. They are endeavoring to alienate the term from any association of changes taking place *within* the camp of Christianity which are moving the landmarks of our biblical forefathers. They refuse to use the term for any defection or forsaking of biblical standards and principles that may be taking place among our own.

Apostasy begins in the heart, with the heart leaving and forsaking the principles of God's Word. The next step is the outflow of compromising actions from that heart. Finally words, both oral and written, are given to excuse or reason away the "falling away" taking place.

The Apostasy During the Days of Elijah

In I Kings 18, the powerful story of Elijah at Mount Carmel is presented under divine inspiration.

The apostasy had opened wide the door of neutrality and compromise among the tribes in the North. A syncretism was evident in the leadership that acknowledged Baal and Jehovah in dual worship. In the previous chapter, Elijah had announced the judgment of God upon the land; he called for no rain to fall until he gave the word for such a blessing to come. He then confronted Ahab and the 850 prophets of Baal in the presence of the people to determine who was the true and living God. It was here that the prophet gave the following cry:

How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.

The time had come for the people to be pressed for the truth; Elijah forced their commitment to one or the other. The prophet would not allow straddling the fence.

Who was this Baal god? He was viewed as the god of lightning and fire, the lord, the possessor of heaven; he was worshipped as the sun god or the god of heat and fire. Baal's prophets cried out, demanding Baal to heed their plea. They became aroused in passion, and perhaps in anger, and leaped upon the altar, cutting themselves with knives and lancets until the blood ran from their veins. Such extreme measures certainly prove sincerity, but it was all to no avail. Heaven answered not a sight or sound of fire.

No Fire from Heaven

Like as of old, the absence of the presence of God is becoming more

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Published 10 months of the year

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evident in churches today. Activities, programs, evangelistic visitation, conferences, retreats, big orchestral professional music, and a host of noise-making get-togethers keep the church schedules full. However, these things do not obtain spiritual growth or bring revival. Busyness, earnestness and even sincerity in our religious undertakings do not make evident the true presence of God. Although there are polished outlines memorized for the delivery, there may be no fire in the pulpit, no fire in the singers who are mutating into entertainers, and no fire in the lives of those who occupy space on the pews. Have we gone so long in our religious ways that we have no concept of what the true presence of God is? that we have no true concept of what a biblical revival is? that we do not even know what to look for? Have we succumbed to the Charismatic definition of a fire that causes us not to seek for any real working of God in our churches? There is the tendency of people, good people, to sit back and wait . . . and wonder . . . and watch as they did in I Kings 18:21. It is evident from both the prayers and conversations of many people, they have no spiritual concept of what to expect from a revival.

Our seminaries and graduate schools have taught about God and all of the theological systems written concerning Him, but very few graduates truly know God or His fire within their lives. Can God truly change lives today? Is a holy, sanctified life possible in our day and time? Can a Christian cross the Jordan River and enter a Canaan life where he has entered the rest of God

as presented in Hebrews 4? Can one become more than a conqueror over the world, the flesh, and the devil? Is it possible to live a constantly anointed, consecrated life fully consumed by the presence of God?

Or have we arrived at a sphere of sophistication in our religious manner that such a manner has taken the place of the genuine presence of the fire of God in the heart? It may be that preachers have gone so long without the true anointing of God in their lives that they believe just as long as the sermon is theologically sound it will be anointed, and yet, it is evident God is not moving the hearts of the people. Anointed music does not need all of the synthetic propping up by pretty, professional arrangements and oddity of modern chordality in the accompaniment. Such impressive music in and of itself is void of God's anointing. The busyness of the music arrangement is no sign of the fire of God. We have come to a time, even among what would be viewed as the conservative spectrum of Christianity, that the synthetic is taking the place of the genuine.

Fire in the Bible

The Old Testament associated the "fire from heaven" with the divine presence of God. It was seen in Genesis 15 when God made the covenant with Abraham; it was present at the call of Moses in Exodus 3; it was manifested at the leading of the children of Israel out of Egypt in Exodus 13; and it was most prominent at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. Fire was present in sacrifices and offerings as well as the

consecration of things. When judgment against idolatrous items and cities came, it was resolved with the presence of fire. We even read of the innate fire of a coal, a “live coal,” becoming the purging agent for a prophet. Yes, the God to whom Elijah prayed was “the God that answereth by fire” (I Kings 18:24b).

Fire was the emblem of the Lord’s glory, His holiness, His jealousy and wrath, His Word, and even the Holy Spirit, and the Glorified Christ. Oh, dear reader, have you personally known the fire of God in your life? How does this fire come? What preparation of heart and life is needed for such a wonder to be known?

The Preparation for the Fire of Revival To Come in Days of Apostasy

What did the prophet do for the preparation of such an answer from heaven? We are told he first “repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down” (18:30). We read in 19:10 that Jezebel had “thrown down” the altars of the Lord; thus, Elijah repaired this altar that had been unused and in disrepair for many years. The first step for preparation of revival is the restoring of the altar to God in one’s life. It is the restoring of a once dedicated life to *God*, not just to the work of the ministry. How often God deals with us through a sermon, a book, or someone’s life and we have a little stirring of the heart that lasts for merely a few days. Do we remember when the fire of God burned within us in the past, when we hungered to read His Word and anticipated seasons of prayer? It is so easy for

ministers to be caught up in the workings of the ministry that their responses become mechanical and human rather than divine.

The prophet took twelve stones to repair this altar; this was the witness of a non-divided house of Israel. Can we expect the fire of God to fall upon us when our wives or husbands and the rest of our families have no concern for the things of God? Do we think as ministers that we have no right to press spiritual matters with our children or our wives? Revival must include the entirety of the family—an undivided altar of stones.

The second heart response of Elijah was the putting of the wood “in order” upon the altar. Wood in the Old Testament is a type of humanity; it was used in so many contexts from the Tabernacle and Temple right down to the sacrifices. It is not only our sins that are to be laid on Christ but also our humanities. When a heart is in communion with God, it will be conscientious over the smallest matters in the life. But when the fire diminishes, there will be the tendency to let those matters go. Carnal Christians tend to only be concerned for the big things, the overt sins, while allowing the little failures to go on in life. Christian schools have become that way: the number of students is often so large that administrations can only deal with the severe problems; they have no time to address the smaller matters in the student’s life that truly form Christian character. The wood is absent from the altar in most

professing Christian lives.

In Job 1:5 we read of a classic example of this truth found in the life of a man:

And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.

Job was not concerned with overt sins coming from his children. He offered burnt offerings, which are the offerings of consecration, not sin. The Hebrew words for “sinned” and “cursed” are the mildest in the Hebrew language; these words define anything that may have detracted them from holiness, a slighting of God in their thoughts, or forgetting to give God praise and glory for the mercies they were enjoying. Yes, Job was concerned for the smallest slights that may have occurred in the hearts of his children against God.

The story of Elijah’s erecting of the altar also included twelve barrels of water, the scarce element of that time. This was the symbol of that which was to come, the rain from heaven. But before the rain of heaven comes, the fire of heaven must come. The rain was the reward of keeping the covenant with God as declared in Deuteronomy 28:1-2,12,23. Rain from God was the response of God to the faithful obedience of His people to the covenant,

while the withholding of rain was the curse in response to the rejection of God in their living.

Finally, there was the prayer of Elijah. In one and one-half verses the prophet called upon the Triune Jehovah (three times the term “Jehovah” is mentioned) and prayed for God to intervene and turn the heart of the people back again. Prayers prayed in churches today lean heavily toward the material comfort and rarely to spiritual needs for the life. Prayers of desired restoration must come up from the hearts of God’s people; this too is part of preparation for personal and church revival. Private prayers and public prayers all must be bathed with such urgency of heart and concern for the genuine burnings of God in the souls. This is what is lacking today in the pulpits, the pews, and the homes. Where are the cries of those longing for the burnings of God in their lives? While the world burns in the lusts of sins, God’s people need to be burning with intense desires for God.

The Fire of God Falling in Days of Apostasy

God did send the fire. Elijah needed no additional supports or assistance to bring it about. It was just the fire of God that came. It was fire that licked up the water, consumed the sacrifice and wood and stones! We dare not look to gimmicks, jokes, pizza parties, funny noses and faces, computers, overhead projectors; we simply look to God with a broken and contrite heart, confessing our sins and our Lord.

What does this fire of God mean today? The fire of God is the personal presence and glory of God coming into the heart and life of an individual; it is the supernatural power of God empowering the individual to overcome temptation and the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit constantly anointing us in all that we say, do and think.

How Do We Know When The True Fire Falls?

There will be a number of biblical evidences in a life when this heavenly fire is manifested. Isaiah 6 reveals there will be a crying of "Woe is me." We will see our utter unworthiness before Him and acknowledge that we are constantly coming short of His glory. When that fire comes, it will bring a purging of everything that is fleshly and unholy in our lives. The Charismatics' concept of the presence of God is more of the New Age view: a hovering feeling that places one in some trance and vision of love; it is more of a sensual feeling. But when the true fire falls from God, there will be a warming of the affections of the heart for Him; there will also be an unveiling of our true self in the light of His true Self. We must remember that "our God is a consuming fire." This fire, God Himself, consumes sin, breaks its power, and consecrates the total man to Christ's glory and honor. This fire will refine the life (Malachi 3:3), bringing to surface, revealing, exposing, and convicting our impurities. Sin *will* be judged when this fire comes; both public and secret sins will be condemned and thoroughly dealt with. There will

be no hiding place for self when this fire falls. This fire will bring an eschewing of evil to the heart; it will break the power of carnality and indifference to the holiness of heart and life. Motives will be dealt with and the wood, hay, and stubble with which we have been building our lives will be burnt up. We would not be laughing in such a revival; we will be trying to crawl underneath the pews to hide from this exposing fire of God.

With such a divine working from God Himself in this consuming fire one would think that all Christians would long for such a reality and product of life. But this is not the case! There are many in the churches today, including its leaders, who do not believe we need a revival of fire. Things are fine just the way they are. For if such fire would fall, it might expose certain "under-the-wood" matters of self and disposition that we would not want exposed. Therefore, many ministers are afraid to preach what it will take to bring such a revival to their church. Their congregations are held together by the glue of lies, deception, hypocrisy, and the necessity of "leaving things alone or you may regret what you will find." Therefore, the sermons are safe, objective, compassionate, and sympathetic to the weaknesses and wrongs of the people. They have well learned how to prepare and deliver their messages through the rough waters and rocks of where their people are living without

*The article continues
after the insert.*

uncovering any of the family or personal sins and perhaps . . . their own.

Conclusion

We are in need of strong Bible preaching to uncover the layers of the hearts of people. Everyone wants the revival of rain to come, but they detest any revival of fire. There can be no rain of blessings to fall upon the people before the fire falls first upon them.

When I was a young boy, my father held several weeks of preaching services in Watha, North Carolina, under a large Sheffey-like tabernacle. Because the place was packed each night, two nights I had to sit on the steps leading up to the pulpit while others sat on the window sills. Several of those nights his preaching lasted nearly two hours while the hunger for God's Word was evident among the hundreds that were present.

Two events remain in my memory from those days. One night as he was preaching under the anointing of the Spirit of God, I saw a man enter the tabernacle leading a cow down the aisle. I thought this to be a very strange thing happening during preaching service. The man motioned to another man mid-way down the aisle who got up and came to his side. The two began whispering to one another, and after a few minutes they both came down to the altar weeping, bringing the cow with them. I found out after the service that this farmer had stolen a cow several years earlier from his neighbor. Because the convicting power of

God had arrested his heart in this matter, he left the service to get another cow from his pasture, transported it to the meeting by truck, and brought it into the tabernacle to make restitution. My father kept on preaching as if he knew what was happening while others walked across the tabernacle to make things right with one another.

That was the fire of God falling upon a broken-hearted people who were repairing altars, gathering stones, and putting on wood in order to prepare for the fire to consume it all. But another night, when the temperature was very warm and some were sitting outside the side-exposed tabernacle on the hoods of their cars, four young men kept heckling my father's preaching. Another minister went out to calm them down and asked them to come into the service to hear the preaching better. They laughingly responded that they were going to ride away and "ride to hell." They got into the car, squealed the tires, and drove off with high speed. Within moments we all heard a loud crash. All four young men were instantly killed as their car crashed into a tree. Yes, that too is the fire of God falling . . . in judgment.

Dear minister of God, do you see the apostasy increasing all around you? Yet, are you longing for a mighty revival of God's fire to fall upon your heart, your life, your preaching, and upon your congregation? Are you longing for it to fall upon your own family? Dear layman, do you see your church drifting away from the Truth, from a

stand for Truth, and is there evidence that there are strong proclivities to contemporary music? Yet, are you longing for personal revival where the fire of God is purging out all your proclivities of neutrality and compromise in your own life and in your family? It is one thing to say, "Woe is the church," and another thing to cry out to God, "Woe is me!" A true revival in a church will destroy all leanings of compromise and shadiness of the contemporary in the music. Perhaps this is what some are afraid of in a true move of God. There can be no rain of blessings before the fire falls. The latter prepares the life for the benefit of the former.

Dear reader, will you pray this summer that God will send a mighty, purging revival to Fundamentalism? Pray that we will see the fire of heaven fall in our services destroying carnality, worldliness, and the powers of the flesh among the people. Pray that we will see the Spirit of God take full control of our lives, our pulpits, our homes, and our schools. Any other so-called revival is not biblical but a counterfeit with less pain and mourning and godly sorrow unto repentance.

Unless a genuine, biblical, God-sent fire comes, I fear what is ahead of us in the next few years. "Lord, send a revival of grace, or we'll see a great revival of sin."

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