

CHAPTER TWO

THE MONSTROUS APOSTASY

"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come except there come a falling away (apostasy) first"

- II Thessalonians 2:3.

"And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many"

- Matthew 24:11.

"These evils are destined to be propagated from generation to generation, waxing worse and worse"

- Dr. Asahel Nettleton,
1854 edition of *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton*.

One hundred and fifty years ago a wicked deception began, which grew in magnitude until it short-circuited revival and caused conversions to become a rare thing among evangelicals. Today we live in the burned out aftermath, our churches either liberal, charismatic, or dead, our people claiming to be born again while missing church, divorcing, dancing, committing fornication and aborting their babies. An increasing number of pastors commit adultery, while our youth go wild.

The monstrous apostasy surrounding us is a direct result of a theological transition which took place in the nineteenth century: a shift from conversion to decisionism. This book is about that change, and what we can do about it.

The stories given in this book are scrupulously true to the facts. They are given without the slightest embellishment. I say that at the beginning, because this first account seems too incredible to be true. But it is. I have known the man in this story for many years. This is exactly what happened.

A "Saved" Bank Robber

Like so many others I have talked to across the years, he had a vague

uneasiness regarding his salvation. Nothing definite, nothing he could put his finger on, just a vague uneasiness. He told me that he had been saved years ago, but he couldn't say much about it. He had gone to a meeting with some friends. An invitation was given. He went forward. He made no mention at all of his sins, the Blood of Jesus or forgiveness. His whole testimony centered around the "decision" that he made years before.

He said that he had led a Christian group in high school. He had then become a Sunday School teacher in a Baptist church and later a deacon. He went through a divorce. Then he lost most of his money and his life fell apart. The thought went through his mind that he should rob a bank. He got out his old pistol. He planned it all carefully and walked into the bank and at gunpoint took all the money the teller could give him. The police caught him and he spent several months in prison.

I asked him, "What would have happened if the rapture had come while you were holding the gun on that teller in the bank?" He stared at me with a sober face. Several seconds passed before he said, "The gun would have fallen to the floor and I would have been raptured."

I was never able to get him to move past a vague uneasiness to a place where he could see that the decision that he made years before was not a real conversion. The story of the man who thought that his pistol would fall to the ground and he would be raptured while robbing a bank illustrates what is wrong with so much of evangelicalism in our country. Yet many would say that this man was converted and would indeed have been raptured. Such is the sad state of religion in our time.

I knew this man as a dear friend from my childhood, when I first began attending church. I have loved him with all my heart. It tears me apart to see him go on clinging to a false hope, without a real conversion to give us hope of meeting together in Heaven some day. Many others have had a similar experience, which has inoculated them against real salvation. Oh God, save this man, and many others like him. Send a revival to sweep away the refuge of lies!

Did It Start With Jimmy Carter?

According to a recent Gallup poll, "Seventy-four percent of American adults eighteen and older say they have made a 'commitment' to Jesus Christ."¹ Yet our nation is morally and spiritually bankrupt. Speaking at a Bible conference I attended not long ago, one famous Baptist preacher said in my hearing, "Ever since President Carter, most people say they have been born

again. They've learned to say it." I think he is partly correct, but the problem goes back farther than that, far back into the nineteenth century. It was a hundred and fifty years ago that a shift began to take place which gradually led to a change from conversions to mere "decisions for Christ."

In his book *Revival and Revivalism: the Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*, Iain H. Murray points out that evangelicalism turned away from the old idea of conversion in the nineteenth century to the "decisionism" taught by Charles G. Finney (1792-1875). Murray declares that this transition was nearly complete in popular evangelical thinking by the beginning of the twentieth century:

The idea that conversion is man's work became endemic to evangelicalism and, just as men forgot that regeneration is God's work, so belief in revival as the work of the Spirit of God disappeared. (This) was a direct product of Finney's theology.²

Murray's book gives deep insight into this pivotal period. Chapter 14 should be read first. It outlines the slide of evangelical religion away from the old idea of conversion into Finney's new doctrine of "decisionism." Conversion as taught by the earlier Protestants and Baptists was gradually forgotten, replaced by a mere decision for Christ, whatever that meant to the individual. "Going forward," "raising the hand," "saying the sinner's prayer," "making Christ one's Lord," believing "the plan of salvation" or a few Bible verses, replaced the Biblical idea of conversion as a work of God within the heart of man.

The change from conversion to decisionism, which was spearheaded by Finney, has been noticed by a number of others. David F. Wells, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has said, "The shift in understanding about conversion had several stages." He gave them and then pointed out that these changes are associated with Charles Finney's ministry.³ The late historian William G. McLoughlin, Jr. spoke of "Charles Grandison Finney, who, in the years 1825-1835, created modern revivalism."⁴ Evangelical theologian J. I. Packer agreed, saying that "evangelism of the modern type was invented by Charles G. Finney in the 1820s."⁵ Richard Rabinowitz has written about the shift from conversion to decisionism during the time of Finney from a secular historian's viewpoint.⁶ Other preachers had a part in this transition, but it was Finney who clearly led the way.

Thus, conversion was changed into decisionism largely through the ministry and writings of Charles G. Finney, as these men have pointed out. Finney's views engulfed the evangelical churches of America, and later, in the twentieth century, infiltrated many churches in the British Isles. Today, Iain Murray's statement is very nearly universal in the English-speaking world: "Men forgot that regeneration is God's work, so belief in revival as the work of the Spirit of God disappeared. (This) was a direct product of Finney's theology."⁷ As William G. McLoughlin, Jr. put it, "He inaugurated a new era in American revivalism. He transformed the whole philosophy and process of evangelism."⁸ We are still dealing with the effects of that transformation today. The apostasy around us reveals that Finney's decisionism has led to the death of our culture.

Although the nineteenth century English literary critic Matthew Arnold would not have understood it this way, his mournful dirge on the retreat of faith, given in the fourth stanza of his celebrated poem "Dover Beach," can be traced to the death of revival through decisionism:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

We can be sure that the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of faith, going out from us like the great tide at Dover Beach, will continue to slip away from our culture unless we repudiate Finney, his methods, and his supporters in the modern world.

Evangelicalism in Britain

British author Brian H. Edwards writes:

I live in a borough of 132,000 inhabitants and I think I know most of the evangelical fellowship and churches among all the denominations; I also have an idea of the numbers that will be found worshipping among them each Sunday and it is hard to get much above one-and-a-half

per cent! And this is the so-called "Bible belt" of the south-east! I have discussed these statistics with Christians living in other towns, particularly in the north, where little more than a handful of believers meet week by week, and it would be difficult to muster one per cent of the population in the evangelical community. I know of one missionary who, during the 1970s, visited every home in a particular town in the north-east with a population of 80,000. He found only six evangelical Christian families; that is 0.015%! How the figure of seven per cent was ever arrived at I do not know, but if it is accurate, then most evangelical Christians in the United Kingdom are unrecognizable during the week and keep well out of the way of Christian fellowship on Sunday.⁹

Thus, the situation in the United Kingdom is dark indeed. We are convinced that decisionist methods have eroded the churches of Britain as well as America. Though they have been far less inclined to use the public invitation, decisionism based on the mere affirmation of doctrine has harmed and emptied British churches in our time.

A Definition of Terms

What do we mean by decisionism? What do we mean by conversion? Here are working definitions of the two terms:

Decisionism is the belief that a person is saved by coming forward, raising the hand, saying a prayer, believing a doctrine, making a lordship commitment, or some other external, human act, which is taken as the equivalent to, and proof of, the miracle of inward conversion; it is the belief that a person is saved through the agency of a merely external decision; the belief that performing one of these human actions shows that a person is saved.

Conversion is the result of that work of the Holy Spirit which draws a lost sinner to Jesus Christ for justification and regeneration, and changes the sinner's standing before God from lost to saved, imparting divine life to the

depraved soul, thus producing a new direction in the life of the convert. The objective side of salvation is justification. The subjective side of salvation is regeneration. The result is conversion.

Decisionism is on a human level. It counts something man does as the indication that conversion has occurred. Real conversion, on the other hand, is a saving encounter with the resurrected Christ. Real conversion is, therefore, supernatural, while decisionism is purely human, carnal and natural. Conversion is from God. Decisionism is from man. In decisionism a person does something which takes the place of a saving encounter with Jesus but is, in fact, not that at all. That is why so many people are unsaved today.

Historian Timothy L. Smith has pointed out these facts about Protestant and Baptist churches before Finney:

Certainly by modern standards church membership was a strenuous affair. All evangelical sects required of communicants a personal experience of conversion and a consistent life. Two worship services and Sunday school on the Sabbath were customary, along with a midweek gathering for prayer. The Methodists* invariably kept new converts on "probation" for many months...Laymen of most denominations were responsible for a large amount of missionary and benevolent work in the towns and cities. ***All of these activities were pursued with a seriousness absent today.***¹⁰

After 150 years of Finney's "decisionism," the entire "seriousness" and commitment of early nineteenth century Protestantism is "absent." In fact, Gallup pollsters found "very little difference in the behavior of the church and unchurched on a wide range of items including lying, cheating and stealing."¹¹ Gallup concluded that "most people's religion is secondary."¹²

"They profess that they know God: but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate" (Titus 1:16).

*And most other Protestant and Baptist churches, in varying degrees.

"Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (II Timothy 3:5).

According to a survey reported in the *Baptist Bible Tribune*, thirty percent of those who claim to be born again believe that "Jesus was a great teacher, but he did not come back to physical life after he was crucified."¹³ Thus, at least one third of those claiming to be born again are lost, since the Bible plainly says they are (I Corinthians 15:17; Romans 10:9). No one can be born again who does not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The survey also found that eighty-four percent of born again Christians "hold the non-biblical view on at least one of eight statements of biblical teaching."¹⁴

It has been my impression, after hearing countless testimonies, that a large number of those who attend evangelical churches every Sunday are lost people, including Sunday School teachers, deacons, pastor's wives, and even pastors themselves. Dr. B. R. Lakin used to say that seventy-five percent of those attending Bible-believing churches were lost.¹⁵ Dr. A. W. Tozer gave an even more dismal figure when he said, "Among evangelical churches probably no more than one out of ten know anything experientially about the new birth."¹⁶ Evangelical author Paris Reidhead wrote,

We've got to recognize that the message of salvation must not be addressed only to 'the world,' but to members of America's evangelical churches also. The greatest field for evangelism today, and in the days ahead, is among church members.¹⁷

Getting Evangelicals Saved

Some time ago, when preaching in an eastern state, I gave a strong sermon on the text, "Why will ye die?" (Ezekiel 33:11). At the invitation seven men came forward. One of them was the associate pastor of the church. He had tears in his eyes, and he came with another man. I assumed that he was bringing this man to the front. However, I soon found out that the associate pastor was coming to be saved himself. He said that he was religious but lost. As he spoke to me later he said, "I wonder how many others have made a decision without knowing what they were doing?"

In another meeting I spoke on Matthew 7:21-23. The next day I went

soulwinning with a young seminary student who had heard my sermon the night before. He told me that he had been afraid all day that they were going to team me up with him. I asked him why this frightened him. He said, "Because I know I'm lost." He was driving, so I said, "Pull over." He parked the car and I asked him to tell me his story. He said that he had been an active Catholic. He came to a Baptist church, brought by a friend, and went forward at the invitation. They baptized him. He told me that he had gone forward out of concern, but that he had never known Jesus Christ. The Christ he described to me was the angry judge (the Pantocrator) of the Roman Catholic Church, not the loving and forgiving Jesus of the Bible. I showed him the difference from the Scriptures. He saw it. He realized that he had never come to the real Jesus spoken of in the Bible. He was hopefully converted that night in the car.

Imagine what would have happened to him if he had graduated from seminary and gone out as a Baptist missionary trying to obey an angry Catholic "Christ." Think of how many people would have been confused by him on the mission field. Thank God he seemed to experience real conversion, instead of a mere decision, before he was sent out to the mission field!

In the next service, the man's wife sat listening to me preach with a strange look in her eyes. Her face went white and she stared straight ahead during the sermon. When the invitation was given she came forward. Everyone was shocked. She had been a teacher in the Christian school for several years. She told me that she had repeated the sinner's prayer when she was a small child, but had never thought of Jesus forgiving her sins. After dealing with her for a few minutes in private, she seemed clearly to have passed from death to life in true conversion.

Our critics may say that we believe people have "to get saved again." But we do not believe this. We are convinced that the Scripture teaches, "Once saved, always saved." ***But many have never been saved in the first place!*** Any charge that we think people have "to get saved again" will not be based on what we have written here, because that is not what we believe. We ***do*** believe that the methods of decisionism have ruined the churches and come near to destroying our nation and the English-speaking world.

Squeeze My Hand To Get Saved

I met one decisionist preacher at a Bible conference. He held out a little leather datebook as I shook his hand. An odd smile crossed his lips as he

said, "Seven thousand saved last year." Later I heard a story about this preacher from a certain pastor. This decisionist is in the habit of "leading people to Christ" as he goes down the street and into the stores. He numbers them in his count of "conversions." In one grocery store he reached out and took a worker's hand in his. He said, "If you want to accept Christ, just squeeze my hand." The man gently pressed his palm, and the decisionist said, "Praise the Lord!" The worker was counted as one of his decisions for that week. A few days later the pastor of the local church went back to the store to follow up on the man. He said, "I'm really glad you got saved the other night." The man looked at him quizzically and finally said, "No hablo Ingles." That made it quite clear that this "decision" was from a Spanish-speaking man who did not understand a word of English, and therefore could not have been converted by the English-speaking decisionist!

Many of these decisionist preachers are being used far less in evangelistic meetings today because pastors see that they do not actually add people to the local church. The main reason they fail to add people to the churches is because they work for "decisions" rather than conversions. Local church pastors need to find ways to actually add people. If they join the church in an unconverted state they generally leave for some reason in a short time or, if they stay, cause trouble of one sort or another. We need to find ways to get more true converts to attend our churches. This book is written in an attempt to help fill that need.

By speaking personally to people in private, I have discovered that many have not understood the gospel. They have raised their hand, said the sinner's prayer, or come forward, but they have not trusted Jesus in a real conversion experience.

So many people have been added to church rolls through decisions rather than conversions that the churches are now full of lost people, including lost church leaders and pastors themselves.

There has been no major national revival since 1859, and no great regional revival since the 1905 Welsh revival was felt in many parts of the English-speaking world. This situation has come about largely because God cannot and will not bless the false doctrines of decisionism, in my judgment.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote,

I have no hesitation in asserting that the main cause of the state of the Christian church today, and the whole state of the world, in consequence, is the terrible

apostasy that has increasingly characterized the church for the last hundred years. And therefore, we have started with this: we have to get rid of this rubbish...What makes us Christians? The work of regeneration; the Holy Spirit of God doing a work down in the very depths of the personality and putting there a principle of life, something absolutely new, so that there is a "new man."¹⁸

Dr. Lloyd-Jones was saying that we must get rid of decisionism and replace it with old-fashioned conversions before we can have true revival and actually add more solid people to our churches.

Bible Facts or Jesus Himself?

How do people get converted? It is not by learning a neat set of doctrines and Bible verses, either in a Catholic catechism class or a Baptist Sunday School. Conversions do not come by Bible knowledge alone. The Bible says, "The Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which *is in Christ Jesus*" (II Timothy 3:15). The Scriptures point us to Christ. Salvation is only in Christ. Believing the Bible, as an end in itself, does not save anyone. I believed every word of the Bible for several years before I was saved. Conversion did not occur until I encountered the resurrected Jesus. That is quite different from believing Bible facts *about* Jesus in nothing more than a decision.

Pollster George Gallup, Jr., has said, "The basic underlying problem is biblical illiteracy." Gallup identified this lack of knowledge as the biggest problem facing our churches today.¹⁹ But he is *dead* wrong on this point. It is not Biblical illiteracy that is at fault. It is the fact that people do not know Jesus Christ, *Himself*. Knowledge of Bible stories and even Bible memorization never saved anyone. The Jehovah's Witnesses usually know the Bible quite well, but they do not know Jesus, Himself.

The Bible was not nailed to the cross. The Bible does not sit at the right hand of God interceding for us. The Bible is God's inspired, inerrant Word *pointing* us to Jesus Christ. He alone is the Saviour. II Timothy 3:15 clearly tells us that the Bible directs us to Jesus for salvation.

There are thousands who have basic Bible knowledge but do not know Jesus Christ, Himself. I was one of them. I had been to Sunday School for

over seven years. I had memorized more than 125 verses of salvation Scripture. I had memorized the facts of the gospel. I even preached the gospel. In fact, I was a licensed Southern Baptist preacher. But I did not know Jesus Christ personally. You see, I had gone to a service with a friend. I followed him when he went forward. It was my first time in a Baptist church. They baptized me in a white robe. But no one spoke to me about conversion. I was accepted for baptism based upon my decision of going forward. As a result, I spent seven miserable years as a lost Southern Baptist. I passed out gospel tracts, preached a memorized gospel, and was even licensed as a Baptist preacher while I was still lost. Without the grace of God, I would have gone on in the ministry unconverted. I am convinced that thousands of other preachers have never experienced a real conversion. They are in the same state I was in for those seven years. They are religious but lost. I know what it's like from personal experience.

FOOTNOTES

¹*National and International Religion Report*, October 8, 1990, p. 8.

²Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: the Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), pp. 412-13.

³David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 93.

⁴William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), p. 11.

⁵J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 292.

⁶Richard Rabinowitz, *The Spiritual Self in Everyday Life: The Transformation of Personal Religious Experience in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989).

⁷Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, same as footnote 2.

⁸McLoughlin, p. 11.

⁹Brian H. Edwards, *Revival! A People Saturated With God* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1991), pp. 15-17.

¹⁰Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 18.

¹¹Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*, July 14, 1984, p. 24.

¹²Ibid.

¹³"Born Again Christians Ignorant of Faith," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, April 15, 1996, p. 28.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Quoted by Roy L. Branson in *Dear Abner, I Love You. Joab* (Bristol, Tennessee: Landmark Publications, 1992), p. 298.

¹⁶A. W. Tozer, quoted by Paris Reidhead in *Getting Evangelicals Saved* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 46.

¹⁷Paris Reidhead, *Getting Evangelicals Saved* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 47.

¹⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1987), pp. 55-57.

¹⁹Los Angeles *Daily News*, July 2, 1994, p. 19.