



## **“Re-digging Old Wells”**

**Part II**

**Kevin Presley**

Water is essential to physical life and in many cases, we rely on wells to provide that water. That was certainly the case back in ancient times. We’re going to continue our look at a story found in **Genesis 26** about Abraham and his servants digging wells in the valley of Gerar. Many years later, after the death of Abraham, Isaac came to that same place and we read what he found.

**Genesis 26:17-19 “And Isaac departed thence, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. And Isaac's servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing water.”**

There is a very important spiritual lesson in this Old Testament narrative. We began this study last week comparing those wells of old to the well of living water that Jesus brought to us. You remember how Jesus taught the woman at Jacob’s well a lesson about who He was and the salvation He brought to earth by likening it to water from a well (**John 4**). But just as in the days of Abimelech, Isaac and Abraham, so the Philistine enemies of truth down through the ages since the establishment of the church have polluted, obstructed and filled in the wells dug by the inspired apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. We read even in the epistles how the apostles remained busy during their ministries, in the very infancy of the church, cleaning out the wells polluted by Judaism (**Galatians**), polluted by pagan immorality and idolatry (**I and II Corinthians**), and so on.

Yet as we look at history since then, the attacks and departures would simply keep coming upon the faith as it was originally authored by Jesus Christ and revealed by His apostles. It is time that sincere men and women re-dig the ancient wells of truth. The church was established by Jesus upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (**Ephesians 2:20**). Their inspired teachings were to be the only creed and rule for the church to follow for all ages.

**Jude 3 “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”**

The faith was delivered *once for all time*. But very soon man began to default to human reasoning and philosophy. They began to go beyond the authority of the apostles whom Christ had appointed to rule over His church. This did not take the apostles by surprise and it did not take the Lord by surprise either. The apostles had warned that apostasy was coming soon after their deaths. In fact, the seeds were already being planted.

**II Thessalonians 2:7 “For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.”**

**Acts 20:29-31 “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”**

As the church spread through the Roman empire, scores of people were converted to Christianity, but trouble was brewing because they brought many of their pagan and idolatrous ways and practices into Christianity with them. There were a series of changes that therefore took place very early on in the church that was established by Jesus. The first changes to the apostolic pattern for Christianity were seemingly small and therefore easy to make. These small changes seemed very logical. The first thing that occurred was that the government of the church was corrupted.

When we read through the book of **Acts** and the epistles, we see that each congregation was governed not by some large superstructure of power over the brotherhood; rather, each congregation was governed by its own duly qualified and appointed elders. Therefore, each church was *autonomous*.

**Acts 20:28 “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”**

Paul was telling the elders of the church at Ephesus to feed the church of God that was among them, to feed the flock among them.

**Acts 14:23 “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”**

So, every church had its own elders. Those elders fed the flock and oversaw the affairs of the church that they were among. In **Titus 1**, Paul gives the qualifications for men who would fulfill this office. It's very clear that an *elder* is the same thing as a *bishop*. The two terms are synonymous, both referring to the same group of men who were overseers over a single congregation. That is the New Testament pattern for church government.

Here's where the problem began: smaller, younger churches began to call upon elders in larger, more mature churches to weigh matters and render decisions in spiritual matters. That seems logical, doesn't

it? But it was contrary to the plan of God. The result is that congregations lost their autonomy, and elders began to exercise authority outside of the congregation they were appointed to serve. Not only was that within itself a departure from the pattern, but it put the church on a very slippery slope that led to grave problems that exist yet today. You see, that human arrangement necessitated logically that one elder be chosen to preside over the others. I mean, if you're going to have all of these elders coming together to make decisions for churches outside of their own, it would seem necessary to have someone preside over all of these elders. So, they began to make a distinction between the office of *elder* and that of a *bishop*, even though the Bible does not make that distinction. That was the beginning of a hierarchy of power that set the stage for a complete apostasy in doctrine and in practice from the church as Jesus had established it.

After a while, they began to make a distinction between the *clergy*—that is, the elevated class, those considered in authority or overseer roles in the church—and the *laity*, or common Christian, so to speak. By 200 A.D., they had begun to refer to elders in a congregation as *priests*, therefore establishing a separate priesthood in the church. One that is separate from the priesthood of every believer, even though **Revelation 1:6** teaches that all Christians under the new covenant ARE priests unto God. We are our own priests unto God, with Christ being our High Priest. Very soon, bishops were appointed to rule over a group of churches in a given area, each church being served by a priest. These *regions* or groups of churches in a region began to be known as a *diocese*, and a bishop would oversee a diocese of churches.

Human wisdom then saw it necessary to provide oversight of the many bishops who were now ruling over these groups of churches, so the office of *archbishop* was created. The Bible says nothing of any of this. The government of the church truly became universal or *catholic* in nature when they created the office of *cardinals* to preside over the archbishops overseeing the diocese and bishops who were overseeing the work of priests in the local churches or *parishes*, which were made up of the laity or common Christians, you see.

Finally, by the year 296—nearly 300 years after Christ established His church—the bishop of Rome was first referred to as *the pope*, and by the year 535 A.D., the *papacy* was established and the pope was then considered the successor of the apostle Peter. He was viewed as the vicar of Christ and therefore the sole inerrant interpreter of scripture; thus, the ultimate authority on earth in religious matters. You see, it started small, and then turned into an unscriptural hierarchy of authority and power over the universal church.

I want you to think about that in relation to the types of governments we see in the many churches and denominations that exist today. Make a note of that because we're going to come back to it in a few moments. This corruption of government and this development of human authority over the worldwide church paved the way for a series of doctrinal changes and ultimately, a complete apostasy from the teaching of Christ. Here are just a few examples.

As soon as 120 A.D., the use of so-called '*holy water*' was introduced into the church by a bishop named Alexander. He contended that the water used for baptism had to be blessed or made holy. By the second century, they were saying that this '*holy water*' had to be holy in order to frighten away devils, to do away with distraction in order to expose the mind to complete devotion, but the Bible says nothing of the sort. The baptism taught by Jesus and His apostles was a simple act of obedient faith—a burial in water—and its efficacy was NOT in the water, but in the blood of Christ that was reached by faith when a sinner obeys the gospel.

So, where do they get this idea of ‘holy water’? Robert Brumback, in his History of the Church Through the Ages points out that it came from the pagan’s custom of dipping their hands in water and sprinkling it on themselves as they entered the pagan temples. I told you that as Christianity spread throughout the pagan Roman empire, many of the converts brought paganism with them. So, the influence of paganism began to pollute the well of pure Christianity as it was authored by Christ and His apostles. That was made very easy because at the time, a worldwide hierarchy with centralized power could teach, practice and enforce this in all of the churches. That’s how apostasy works.

By 157 A.D., the doctrine of *penance* emerged. It took about 300 years for it to be fully developed and it wasn’t until about the year 1022 when the apostate church fully embraced it. The doctrine of penance says that if a person left the church, they had to meet certain requirements in order to return and be accepted back. Some requirement was imposed by human beings upon them to show that they had truly repented. These penitents were classified in at least four different categories and were dealt with accordingly. But men don’t have the authority to make rules and requirements to bar one from the kingdom of heaven. That’s Christ’s prerogative and His authority as expressed through His apostles and therefore in the word of God.

The unscriptural idea of penance eventually led to the idea of a *human intercessor*: if a person confessed to a clergy member or priest, and satisfied that expectation, then the priest has the authority to absolve the sins of the penitent one. We’re very familiar with this in religion today. But the New Testament teaches no such doctrine. Again, the well is being stopped up by the Philistines, as it were.

By 190 A.D., we have the first mention of the *apostle’s creed*. In the first century, men were told simply to confess their faith in Christ as the Son of God (**Acts 8:37, Romans 10:9**). But that simple confession later became a long, intricate list of doctrinal affirmations that consequently has been changed numerous times throughout history.

The only creed we need and the only one we should subscribe to is the New Testament--nothing more and nothing less. No matter how many true things it may profess, if the so-called *apostle’s creed* or any other creed is only saying what the New Testament says, doesn’t that beg the question why do we need the creed anyway? Why not just simply speak as the oracles of God and follow the teachings of the apostles as they are laid out in the New Testament? But men were polluting the well of truth. Today, what do we have? Look around. We have the Westminster Confession, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, the catechism, the church manual...on and on and on...Again, I want you to make a note of that because I’m going to refer back to it in a little bit.

In the year 220 A.D., Origen advocated the doctrine of *purgatory*, and eight hundred years later by the year 1070, it was fully embraced by the Roman church. That being the belief that sinners go to a place of torment from whence they can be redeemed by the prayers and works of the saints on earth. The Bible teaches no such doctrine.

By 350 A.D., the priests began referring to the Lord’s Supper as *the mass*. By 666 A.D., pope Vitalian authorized the use of *instrumental music* in Christian worship. For six hundred years, it was not practiced, but the pope authorized it and it began to be practiced. By 1123, the clergy were forbidden to marry.

We could go on and on. In fact, we’ve just touched the surface of it all. We could talk about the introduction of *sprinkling* for baptism, *infant baptism*, the false doctrine of *transubstantiation*, etc. You

see, the general shift that began occurring soon after the first century snowballed into a complete corruption of New Testament teaching and practice, and produced the full-blown Roman apostasy. But the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back came with the *sale of indulgences*. That doctrine began as early as 820 A.D. and was embraced by the year 1190. Indulgences were a source of revenue for the church and were sold to people under the guise of offering them pardon from their sins. This doctrine was contrary to everything the New Testament teaches about repentance and redemption.

**I Peter 1:18-19 “...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”**

But this *sale of indulgences* was more than some could stand. It was one of the main catalysts that led a German monk by the name of Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517 to defiantly nail his so-called 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg Castle Church, protesting the excesses and abuses of the Catholic church. To his credit, his two central themes were *the authority of scripture as opposed to church hierarchy* and his contention that *salvation was through faith in Christ and not by conforming to the rules and doctrines of men*. That event essentially sparked the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation. Shortly thereafter, Zwingli and Calvin launched the Swiss Reformation, and the eventual result was the emergence of several protestant denominations divided by various doctrines and practices, and now today, we have seen the spirit of sectarianism seed the world with hundreds of denominations, sets and factions.

Now, there were some commendable things about the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They were correct in their complaints and protests against the corrupt and apostate church. You might say that their motive was to clean out the wells of truth polluted with paganism and Romanism and human tradition. But they didn't go far enough. In fact, what was needed by this point was not a reformation of what then was, but a FULL restoration of what was in the beginning. Why did the reformation not go far enough? Well, what led to the apostasy to begin with? A change in church government.

Did the reformation lead to the Bible model of autonomous congregations of the church of Christ, each governed by its own elders and served by its own deacons? No, many if not most denominations today are organized and ruled according to a very similar hierarchy of authority, as we see in Catholicism with some variations and office titles and their scope of authority. (By the way, the whole idea of denominations within Christianity is sinful and unscriptural within itself according to **I Corinthians 1:10-13**). Denominations have their presidents, superintendents, governing councils, conventions, officers, delegates, etc. None of which are mentioned in the Bible.

Not so with the church of the first century. The apostles were the only 'universal government' over the church, and they still serve as such by way of their inspired writings known as the New Testament. Each local congregation is to be overseen by its own qualified elders and deacons and there is not organizational structure beyond that of each local, autonomous church.

What did the reformation produce? It may have attempted to clean the well out some, but friend, the well needs to be re-dug because we have multitudes of denominations bearing humanly conceived names, following many different patterns for worship, teaching conflicting, opposing and warring doctrines, even on such basic matters as salvation! Ironically, in rejecting the human traditions and creeds of Catholicism, protestant denominationalism today has produced more creeds than we can count! Surely we can see the wells of old need to be re-dug. But how? Back in our text, the Bible says

that after Isaac re-dug the wells of his father Abraham, *he called them by the names which his father had called them (Genesis 26:18)*. That is the key.

**I Peter 4:11 “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.”**

In other words, the Bible is enough. Speak as God has spoken. We don't need creeds besides the bible itself. We don't need modern revelations. People lean to conscience, common sense, the views of experts, theologians, tradition, experience... all as the extra-biblical basis for authority in the church. The wells of truth need to be re-dug. We need to simply go back to the Bible and do Bible things in Bible ways, calling Bible things by Bible names.

**II Timothy 3:16-17 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

Oh, how desperately in this age of religious confusion, division and error do we need to re-dig the ancient wells.

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