

“You’ve Come A Long Way Baby!” — So Have Churches

by Bill Crews

Most of us are surely familiar with the magazine commercials of an American tobacco company that were used over a period of many years, that were targeted for women smokers, that featured the same heading:

“You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.” The obvious message was this: Society has changed; smoking by women, like many other things, was once frowned upon or forbidden; society’s rules and attitudes now allow many things on the part of women that were once taboo; so go ahead and indulge in your new-found freedoms, and while you’re at it, by all means use our brand of cigarettes! Yes, women have come a long way, but we must keep in mind that it is all relative, and whether any changes are for the better or the worse must be measured by God’s unchanging standard revealed to us in the Bible. God’s word sets the pattern for the dress, the speech, and the deportment of every woman — and man!

However, in this article I would like to apply the familiar heading of those commercials to **churches**. They, too, have *“Come a Long Way.”* They have made many changes also, and, unfortunately, those changes have been dictated more by society’s changes and desires than by the teaching of God’s revealed word.

The death of Christ on the cross was required to make His church a reality (Matt. 16:18 — *“I will build my church”*; Acts 20:28 — *“the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood”*; Eph. 5:25 — *“even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it”*). It was God’s eternal purpose that brought it into existence (Eph. 3:10-11). It is spiritual in character, nature and purpose (1 Pet. 2:5; Jn. 18:36-37; Eph. 4:11-16; 6:12; 2 Cor. 10:3-6). All of the saved, the followers of Christ, Christians constitute it (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 12:18, 27). Under the guidance and direction of the apostles (who were in turn guided by the Holy Spirit) the saved were gathered into and constituted local (area) churches or congregations (Jn. 16:13; Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:10-11). Every saved person has been given individual obligations (Lk. 10:25-37; Matt. 5; 6; 7; Rom. 12; 13; James 1; etc.), but all the saved have been given no collective work to do. That is why the church universal has been provided with no central governing body or organization by which it can function as a unit. But local churches or congregations have been so arranged and so ordered by God that the saved who constitute them can act as one (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Phil. 1:1). Their primary function is to keep the saved saved by providing for their spiritual growth and faithfulness and to strive to save the lost by teaching them the word of God.

In the New Testament we read about churches assembling, worshiping (singing, praying, teaching and learning more of God’s will, and on the first day of each week observing the memorial supper of the Lord and giving into a common treasury according to their means), exercising corrective discipline, and spreading the gospel of Christ. We also see them providing for the poor and indigent among them and even helping other churches in such matters. We find no organization larger or smaller or other than a local congregation. We do not read about any inter-congregational or intra-congregational organizations. And we do not read about congregations engaging in general works of benevolence for the people of their surrounding communities, in commercial business endeavors, in purely social and civic activities, recreational or entertainment efforts, political campaigns, or medical services. They appealed to people outside the church with the gospel of Christ, its message of love and sacrifice, and its promise of forgiveness of sins, reformation of life, fellowship with God, and the hope of eternal life in Christ.

In our own nation in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, most churches who were comprised of people professing to be Christians and to accept the Bible as the revelation of God’s will to man were

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