

REVISED EDITION

Ancient Champions of Oneness

An Investigation of the
Doctrine of God in Church History

William B. Chalfant

Ancient Champions of Oneness

by William B. Chalfant

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I

Grievous Wolves

“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” (Acts 20:29-30).

When the church was born into the world, there was only one church both inwardly and outwardly. There were no denominations. The men and women in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost were all with one accord in one place (Acts 2:1).

The marvelous experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in other tongues (Acts 2:4), was the catalyst that would turn backward Galileans into dynamic missionaries for Jesus Christ.

Yet there was a long road of blood, sweat, and tears ahead for the apostles and disciples of Jesus Christ. They

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were constantly opposed by wicked people who attacked the apostolic church both within and without. After Paul's departure from this life, the apostle John actually faced a situation where an ungodly man had taken over an assembly:

"I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not . . . neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church" (III John 9-10).

This incident apparently happened at the turn of the century. Jesus, through the pen of John (c. AD 96), warned the churches in Asia Minor to resist wicked men and women who were creeping into the churches (Revelation 2-3).

The apostle Peter wrote of wicked men who despised the government of the church (II Peter 2:10). He called them "presumptuous," self-willed, and not afraid to speak evil of church dignities. They were pretending to have the baptism of the Spirit, sitting in Spirit-filled services.

Such descriptions let us know that the apostolic church was under attack even in the first century. Paul described the false teachers as "grievous wolves," who attacked the church, and "perverse men," who drew away disciples from the church.

Jude, brother of the Lord, stated that false teachers had "crept in unawares," that these people were "turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness," and that they were "denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). It seems that they were continuing to live

in sin while claiming to be Christians, and further, that they were denying in some way the deity of the Lord. One Greek interlinear text says they denied “the only Master, God and our Lord, Jesus Christ.” Peter also wrote about early dissidents that denied the Lord (II Peter 2:1).

We also know that troubles broke out in the apostolic churches in the last quarter of the first century from an early follower of the apostles, Clement of Rome (c. AD 96). Clement was identified by the third- and fourth-century writers Origen and Eusebius as the disciple of Paul mentioned in Philippians 4:3. Irenaeus of Lyons, another third-century writer, stated that Clement was the third successor of Peter in Rome as the bishop of the church there.¹

Clement seems to have been an educated Roman of Jewish descent. Around AD 96 he learned of a tragic split in the district of Corinth and wrote a letter to the ministers at Corinth, encouraging them to heal the breach that had developed. From what we can conclude from Clement’s letter to Corinth, it seems that a clique, or one or two young ministers, had promoted a rebellion against the leadership of the Corinthian church. Clement concluded that it was:

an injustice to eject from the sacred ministry the persons who were appointed either by [the apostles], or later, with the consent of the whole church, by other men of high repute, and have ministered to the flock of Christ faultlessly, humbly, quietly, and unselfishly, and have moreover, over a long period of time, earned the esteem of all.²