

END TIME APOSTASY

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,

1 Timothy 4:1

The free-fall of American evangelical Christianity into various kinds of apostasy in the last couple of decades has been breathtaking. The last twenty-five years have witnessed the greatest change in the American Church in her entire history. Where are things headed? What does this mean in light of the Bible's prophesied plan for the church age?

WHAT IS APOSTASY?

The English meaning of apostasy means "the abandonment or renunciation of a religious belief"¹ or simply to depart from one's faith. Wikipedia says that apostasy "is the formal abandonment or renunciation of one's religion, especially if the motive is deemed unworthy."² Thus, an apostate is one who moves away from something that he formerly held. There are two words used in the Greek New Testament for apostasy. First is *apostasia*, from which we get our English word apostasy. The noun, *apostasia* is a compound of the two Greek words *apo* "from" and *istémi* which means "to stand," hence "to stand away from," or more smoothly put, "to depart from." Next, is the verb *piptô* which simply means "to fall," or "fall away from."³ When used abstractly of "falling away from the faith," for example, it fits into the category of apostasy.

When surveying the New Testament teaching on apostasy, it becomes apparent that it is one of the most frequently mentioned subjects. Yet, rarely do evangelicals preach, teach, or talk about this frequently mentioned biblical topic. There are a large volume of Scripture passages in the Epistles alone that are devoted to the issue of apostasy: Romans 1:18-32; 10; 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 11:1-15; 13:5; Galatians 1:6-9; 5:1-12; Philippians 3:2, 18-19; Colossians 2:4-23; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-3; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:11-26; 3:1-9; 4:15; Titus 1:10-16; Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:12-6:12; 10:26-31; 12:14-17; 1 Peter 3:19-20; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-10; 1 John 2:18-23; 3:4-12; 4:1-6; 2 John 9; Jude 3-23. Apostasy and its evil effects provide the main message of such books as Galatians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and Revelation. Further, Paul warned the Ephesians elders of apostasy during his final meeting with them after spending three years teaching them (Acts 20:17-38).

In summarizing New Testament descriptions of apostasy, they fall in two broad categories. First, apostasy relates to the area of doctrine. Specifically, an apostate is one who moves away from the sound doctrine of the New Testament to a false or unhealthy teaching that does not line up with the Bible. Second, apostasy relates to behavior. Anyone who professes to be a believer and does not follow the New Testament ethic is viewed as an apostate. Simply put, apostasy has to do with *word* and *deed*.

THE CHURCH AGE

Apart from a few exceptions, the church age is not a time of prophetic fulfillment. Instead, prophecy will be fulfilled after the rapture, in relation to God's dealing with the nation of Israel in the seven-year tribulation. The current church age in which believers

live today does not have a specific prophetic countdown or timetable, as does Israel and her 70 weeks of years prophecy (Daniel 9:14-27). The New Testament does, however, provide general traits that characterize the church age.

Even specific prophecy that is fulfilled during the church age relates to God's prophetic plan for Israel and not directly to the church. For example, the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple in A.D. 70 relates to Israel (Matthew 23:38; Luke 19:43-44; 21:20-24). Thus it is not inconsistent that prophetic preparations relating to Israel are already underway with the reestablishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 even though we still are living in the church age.

The church age is not characterized by historically verifiable prophetic events, except her ending with the rapture. But the general course of this age has been prophesied and can provide a general overview of what can be expected during this age.

THE LAST DAYS

Sometimes Christians read in the Bible about the "last days," "end times," etc., and tend to think that all of these phrases all of the time refer to the same thing. This is not the case. Just as in our own lives, there are many endings. There is the end of the work day, the end of the day according to the clock, the end of the week, the end of the month, and the end of the year. Just because the word "end" is used does not mean that it always refers to the same time. "End" is restricted and precisely defined when it is modified by "day," "week," etc.

The Bible teaches that this present age will end with the rapture, followed by the tribulation which will end with the second coming of Messiah to the earth. Thus, we must distinguish between the "last days" of the church age and the "last days" of Israel's tribulation. The following passages refer to the end of the church age: 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 1 Peter 1:5, 20; 2 Peter 3:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18.

APOSTASY AND THE LAST DAYS

The New Testament teaches us to expect that apostasy will arise within the church throughout the church age, but especially during the last days of the church. In fact, guarding against apostasy is one of the top priorities that the New Testament assigns for a pastor and the spiritual leadership of a local church to be engaged. Yet, I have found over the years that about the only ones who take these passages seriously are those who also take a literal interpretation of prophecy seriously. Generally, there are some exceptions, one has to believe strongly in the biblical teaching of premillennialism to be engaged in practicing the New Testament warnings concerning various kinds of apostasy. Most within evangelicalism want to be positive, which is an apostate mentality, instead of biblically truthful about issues.

There are seven major passages that warn of the dangers latent during the church's last days (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Pet. 2:1-22; 3:3-6; Jude 1-25). Interestingly, virtually all of these comments come from the epistles written shortly before the death of each Apostle writing (i.e., during the last days of the various Apostles), as if to highlight their warnings about apostasy in the last days of the current church age. Every one of these passages emphasizes over and over again that the great characteristic of the final time of the church will be that of *apostasy*.

Laodicea is the seventh church of Revelation 2—3 and likely represents the condition of the final stage of the church. Laodicea is clearly the most apostate of the

seven churches. In fact, our Lord threatens to spew this self-sufficient church out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16) and he is pictured as outside of His own church knocking (Rev. 3:20). Individual believers within this church are not threatened, but it is clear that this church is primarily made up of apostates, who are not true believers. The apostasy of the church in our day is preparing Christendom for her role during the tribulation as the Great Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17:1-7) that will be used by the Antichrist to gain world power. Dr. Pentecost notes: "This condition at the close of the age is seen to coincide with the state within the Laodicean Church, before which Christ must stand to seek admission. In view of its close it is not surprising that the age is called an "evil age" in Scripture."⁴

The New Testament pictures the condition within the professing church at the end of the age by a system of denials.

- Denial of **GOD**—Luke 17:26; 2 Timothy 3:4-5
- Denial of **CHRIST**—1 John 2:18; 4:3; 2 Peter 2:6
- Denial of **CHRIST'S RETURN**—2 Peter 3:3-4
- Denial of **THE FAITH**—1 Timothy 4:1-2; Jude 3
- Denial of **SOUND DOCTRINE**—2 Timothy 4:3-4
- Denial of **THE SEPARATED LIFE**—2 Timothy 3:1-7
- Denial of **CHRISTIAN LIBERTY**—1 Timothy 4:3-4
- Denial of **MORALS**—2 Timothy 3:1-8,13; Jude 18
- Denial of **AUTHORITY**—2 Timothy 3:4⁵

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, characterizes the last days apostasy for the church in the following way:

A very extensive body of Scripture bears on the last days for the Church. Reference is to a restricted time at the very end of, and yet wholly within, the present age. Though this brief period immediately precedes the great tribulation and in some measure is a preparation for it, these two times of apostasy and confusion—though incomparable in history—are wholly separate the one from the other. Those Scriptures which set forth the last days for the Church give no consideration to political or world conditions but are confined to the Church itself. These Scriptures picture men as departing from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-2). There will be a manifestation of characteristics which belong to unregenerate men, though it is under the profession of "a form of godliness" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-5). The indication is that, having denied the power of the blood of Christ (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5 with Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:23-24; 2 Tim. 4:2-4), the leaders in these forms of righteousness will be unregenerate men from whom nothing more spiritual than this could proceed (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14).⁶

CONCLUSION

The clear course of the last days for the church consists of constant warnings to the believer to be on guard against doctrinal defection, known as apostasy. Scripture indicates that apostasy will characterize Christendom during the time when the rapture will take place. Thus we need to be sober and alert to the many ways in which the current evangelical church in America is sinking into apostasy, lest we too become caught up in things that are not pleasing to our Lord. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ According to my Apple Macintosh computer, *Dictionary*, 2.0.1.

² *Wikipedia*, accessed on April 21, 2008.

³ Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), electronic edition.

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 155.

⁵ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 155.

⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1952), vol. IV, p. 375.