

THE LAST DAYS APOSTASY OF THE CHURCH

Part I

by Andy Woods

Many other topics would be more pleasant to write about rather than the last days apostasy of the church. It would be far easier to talk about the positive topic of God's love rather than something as negative as apostasy. Yet, this subject must be broached since it is part of God's message in the Bible. In fact, this series will contend that it is impossible to understand God's plan for the end times without understanding what Scripture reveals about the last days apostasy of the church.

Let's begin with a definition of apostasy. The English word apostasy is derived from two Greek words. The first word is the preposition *apo*, which means "away from." The second word is the verb *histēmi*, which means, "to stand." Thus, apostasy means, "to stand away from." Apostasy refers to a departure from known or previously embraced truth. The subject of apostasy has little to do with the condition of the unsaved world, which has always rejected divine truth and therefore has nothing from which to depart. Rather, apostasy pertains to the spiritual temperature within God's church. While some might think that apostasy relates to some external factor such as whether the economy is up or down, the subject of biblical apostasy relates to internal church conditions.

Because comprehension of what Scripture reveals concerning apostasy is critical toward completely understanding God's end-time program, this series will develop several general characteristics of apostasy. They include the following: apostasy is a sign of the last days, is warned against repeatedly in the New Testament, impacts every major doctrine, is internal, knows no limits in terms of who becomes involved in it, can happen quickly, is satanically energized, is destructive, makes life difficult for the man of God, and can be guarded against.

A Sign of the Last Days

Apostasy is a sign of the last days of the church. When we speak of the signs of the end, many subjects come to mind such as the return of the Jews to their land or the trend toward one-world government. However, these kinds of signs concern God's future program for Israel rather than the church. Apostasy is another sign, often taking place right under our noses, which we fail to recognize as a sign of the end. Apostasy is the specific scriptural sign given indicating that the church is nearing the completion of her earthly mission.

Second Timothy 3:1 says, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come." Paul's words to Timothy here are important since this letter represents Paul's last will and testament. Because they were given just prior to the apostle's death (2 Tim 4:6), they represent a time in his life when he was most serious. Also, this book, along with 1 Tim and Titus, is a pastoral epistle designed to give young Timothy apostolic guidance regarding how to pastor God's church. Here, Paul does not predict a last days revival but rather the coming of dangerous times. Later on in the same chapter Paul explains, "But evil men and imposters *will grow worse and worse*, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim 3:13; italics added). Thus, Paul in this final letter seems to be anticipating an increasing drifting away from truth throughout the church age.

The prediction of growing apostasy throughout the present age can also be seen in the eight Matthew 13 parables. In Matt 12, it is apparent that Israel was going to

reject her king and His offer of the kingdom. Israel's religious leaders had even attributed Christ's miracles to Satan (Matt 12:24). Thus, in Matt 13, Christ through the use of eight parables outlines the course of a new intervening age to elapse in between Israel's rejection of the king and when she will accept Him in the future. This new age represents truth unrevealed in prior revelation (Matt 13:16-17). While encompassing the church age (which exists in between the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2 and the rapture), this new era extends beyond it as well. It begins with Israel's formal rejection of Christ's kingdom offer (prior to Acts 2) and ends when Israel accepts her king (after the rapture). When taken together, these eight parables describe the course of this new era.

The parable of the sower teaches that the gospel will be preached throughout the new age with various results depending upon how the hearer's heart has been prepared (13:1-9, 18-23). The parable of the wheat and the tares teaches that it will be difficult to distinguish between the saved and the unsaved throughout professing Christendom and a separation between them will not transpire until the age's conclusion (13:24-30, 36-43). The parable of the mustard seed teaches that Christendom will experience great numerical and geographic expansion from a humble beginning (13:31-32). The parable of the leaven working its way through the meal teaches that professing Christendom will experience increasing moral and doctrinal corruption as the age progresses (13:33).

This parable is the most important in terms of predicting increasing apostasy throughout the present age. Unfortunately, many interpreters miss this crucial point by interpreting the leaven as something good rather than evil. Walvoord explains:

What does the leaven represent? Postmillenarians and amillenarians...usually assume dogmatically that leaven cannot represent evil in the parable, although it is universally used to represent evil in both the Old and New Testaments...It is more evident than ever in the last third of the twentieth century that the gospel has not permeated the world and that evil tends to permeate the entire professing church, which is exactly what Matthew 13 teaches. In the Old Testament leaven is consistently used to represent evil...In the New Testament, leaven was used by Christ of the externalism of the Pharisees, of the unbelief of the Sadducees, and of the worldliness of the Herodians, and in general of evil doctrine (Mt 16:6-12; Mk 8:14-21). In Paul's letters, likewise, leaven represents evil, as in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 and Galatians 5:7-10. In the parable, the meal represents that which is good...The professing church, however, is permeated by evil doctrine, externalism, unbelief, and worldliness, which tends to inflate the church and make it larger in appearance, even as the leaven inflates the dough but actually adds nothing of real worth. The history of the church has all too accurately fulfilled this anticipation, and the professing church in the world, large and powerful though it may be, is permeated by the leaven of evil which will be judged in the oven of divine judgment at the end of the age...To some extent, evil will extend even to...the body of true believers in the church as well as those that come to Christ after the rapture...even true believers fall far short of perfection and can embrace to some extent worldliness, externalism, and bad doctrine.¹

Toussaint similarly notes:

The discussion revolves around the significance of the word “leaven” (*zymē*). Many contend that leaven is used here in a good sense and pictures the spread of the gospel throughout the earth. Others state that the word represents evil and is used to illustrate the growth of evil within the group which professes to inherit the kingdom. This latter interpretation has the stronger support. It is consistent with the doctrine of Scripture concerning the evil character of the end of the church age and the tribulation (1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3; Jude; 2 Peter 3; Revelation 6–19). One of the greatest supports for the interpretation that leaven speaks of evil is the use of the word in Scripture. Invariably leaven pictures sin (Exodus 12; Leviticus 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Matthew 16:12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). Finally the verb used here, “to hide” ...is very unusual if leaven represents good. It is a much more fitting word if leaven is to have a sinister effect. This is similar to the idea in the parable of the wheat and the darnel. The way the woman hides the leaven in the meal parallels very closely the manner in which the enemy sowed darnel by night. This parable reveals the fact that evil will run its course and dominate the new age. But it also indicates that when the program of evil has been fulfilled, the kingdom will come.ⁱⁱ

The parable of the hidden treasure teaches that national Israel (Exod 19:5) will remain in unbelief only to be converted at the age’s conclusion (13:44). The pearl of great price teaches that the Lord will gain a treasure from among the Gentiles throughout the interadvent age (13:45-46). The parable of the dragnet teaches the same message as the wheat and tares or the co-existence of good and evil only to be separated at the age’s conclusion (13:47-50). The parable of the householder depicting the man bringing both new and old treasures from his house teaches that these parables describing fresh and new truths about the course of the present age must be considered alongside what prior revelation teaches about the future kingdom in order to understand God’s total program (13:51-52).

Thus, the present age represents a period when the gospel is preached resulting in the salvation of some. However, a counterfeit sowing will also take place. Despite God’s work throughout the church age, Christendom will experience an increasing doctrinal and moral corruption. Therefore, the teaching concerning the increasing apostasy of the church can be found not only in Paul’s final letter but also in the Matthew 13 parables.

This teaching on the apostasy of the church does not mean that God cannot sovereignly send refreshing waves of revival and reformation, as He has done at various times. However, these refreshing seasons are not the norm but rather occur only intermittently throughout church history. Also, a proper understanding of apostasy represents a worldview that is diametrically opposed to “kingdom now” theology, which is the idea that the church will gradually Christianize the world thereby ushering in long-term cultural progress. The only way “kingdom-now” theology can be defended from Scripture is to ignore what the New Testament predicts concerning the apostasy of the church.

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), pp. 102-4.
- ⁱⁱ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2005), p. 182.