

THE LAST DAYS APOSTASY OF THE CHURCH – PART II

Apostasy must be understood in order to comprehend the last days scenario. This series of articles is dedicated toward tracing the general characteristics of apostasy. In the previous article, apostasy was defined as a movement within Christ's church representing a departure from known truth. There, it was also established that apostasy is the central sign revealed in Scripture signaling the near completion of the church's earthly mission (2 Tim 3:1, 13; Matt 13:33).

A Massive New Testament Subject

Another point to understand about apostasy is that it represents a massive New Testament subject. Surprisingly, apostasy is one of the most frequently mentioned subjects in all of the New Testament. In fact, it is difficult to read much of the New Testament before encountering warnings concerning apostasy. For example, such warnings are found in the Gospels (Matt 13), Acts (Acts 20:29-31), the Pauline letters (Rom 16:17-18; Gal 1:6-9; 2 Cor 11:1-15; Philip 3:2, 18-19; Col 2:8; 1 Tim 4; 2 Tim 3-4; Titus 1:10), and the general epistles (Heb 2:1-4; 2 Pet 2-3; Jude; 1 John 4:1-6).¹ The early chapters of the Apocalypse also reveal the reality of apostasy. Revelation 2-3 describes seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. Five of these seven churches are in need of rebuke from Christ due to their apostate condition.

Interestingly, entire New Testament books were written solely for the purpose of warning believers concerning apostasy. Galatians was written in order to warn against the Judaizers. Colossians was written for the purpose of warning Christians about the Colossian heresy. Hebrews was written to keep the audience from leaving the full

¹ For an expanded list of New Testament verses dealing with apostasy, see H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), 281, n. 46.

revelation of Christ and lapsing backwards into Judaism. Both Jude and 2 Peter were written as warnings concerning apostasy.

Sadly, despite the abundance of New Testament material dealing with the subject of apostasy, very few modern Christians have ever heard a sermon on apostasy from their local church. Perhaps the reason for this omission has to do with the subject's negativity. Because apostasy is not a positive subject, many preachers avoid it. It is far easier for pastors to talk about something positive, practical, or relevant than it is to warn of the inherent dangers associated with apostasy.

Apostasy Concerns Every Major Doctrine

Yet another point to understand is that warnings against apostasy pertain to every major doctrine. What will the apostates deny? Is there any doctrine that will be left off the “chopping block”? Are there any doctrines that are so essential to the heart of Christianity and considered so precious that no apostate would dare deny them? The answer is a resounding “no!” The New Testament reveals that apostates will deny “the faith” (1 Tim 4:1). Notice the definite article in front of the word faith. In other words, the apostates will even deny the very faith of Christianity. Apostates will also deny God (Jude 4). 2 Peter 2:1 predicts a denial of both Christ and His atoning death when it says, “denying the master who bought them.” The apostates will also deny “sound doctrine” (2 Tim 4:3).

They will similarly deny God's role in creation (2 Pet 3:5). The verb *thelō*, which means to “whish” or “desire,”² in this verse expresses the apostates desire to push God out of their thinking when contemplating creation. The NKJV well captures this idea when it translates 2 Pet 3:5 as follows: “For this they *willfully forget*: that by the word of

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 447.

God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water” (italics added). Not only will the apostates deny God’s role in creation, but they will also deny His future return. 2 Peter 3:4 records the apostates asking, “Where is the promise of His coming?” Despite the fact that the return of Christ is embraced by virtually all of Christendom’s creeds and confessions, Scripture predicts that the apostates will even deny this important doctrine. We are seeing this prophecy being fulfilled today with the resurgence of preterism, which takes prophecies that have traditionally been understood as futuristic and instead argues for their historic or past fulfillment. Full preterists even go so far as to say that there is no such thing as a future Second Coming since *all* Bible prophecy has been fulfilled in the past.³

The New Testament predicts that the apostates will even tamper with the doctrine of the resurrection. One would think that at least this doctrine would be off limits since Christianity collapses if Christ has not been resurrected. Paul explained, “and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). However, Paul elsewhere explained that the apostates would have little respect even for the resurrection and its implication. He noted, “Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that *the resurrection has already taken place*, and they upset the faith of some” (2 Tim 2:17-18, italics added). Thus, the preceding discussion indicates that there are no doctrinal “sacred cows” as far as the apostates are concerned. The New Testament predicts that everything that can be denied will be denied.

³ For a refutation of the preterist position, see Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., *The End Times Controversy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2003).

An Internal Matter

Another characteristic of apostasy is that it is primarily internal. Toward the end of his third missionary journey, Paul made a stop at Miletus, which is an Asia Minor seaport near Ephesus. It is there that he had the opportunity to address the elders of the church at Ephesus. In this magnificent address as recorded in Acts 20:18-35, Paul unfolded grand ecclesiology principles designed to govern the ministries of the Ephesian elders as they attempted to shepherd Christ's church at Ephesus. In this discourse, Paul also sounded the alarm concerning apostasy. Apparently, Paul was serious about this subject since he had warned the Ephesian elders about it both day and night, with tears, for a period of three years (Acts 20:31).

As Paul depicted the characteristics of apostasy, he also noted its internal character. He said, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And *from among your own selves* men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29; italics added). Jude also noted the internal character of apostasy. He explained, "For certain persons *have crept in unnoticed*" (Jude 4, italics added). Thus, these verses indicate that apostasy is not something that takes place outside of the four walls of the church. Rather, it is a reality that takes place within her midst. When one looks for apostasy, he should not look for it in the unsaved world. Instead he should look for it behind pulpits, in Christian publications, and even in Christian schools.

Apostasy Knows No Limits

Another characteristic of apostasy is that it knows no limits. The very people or groups that one would initially think would not be involved in apostasy are sometimes the very ones "leading the charge" into apostasy. For example, Exodus 32:1-10 indicates that while Moses was on Mount Sinai for a 40-day period receiving God's Law, the children of Israel at the base of Mount Sinai quickly apostatized by constructing a golden

calf. What is most shocking about this event is that the ringleader of this apostasy was none other than the high priest Aaron. Similarly, Judges 17–18 records a wandering Levite who helped introduce the first instance of idolatry into the land of Israel after the conquest under Joshua. This idolatry was first introduced into a household and then an entire tribe (Dan). Again, what is startling about this story is that the Levite responsible for these actions was none other than Jonathan, who was the son of Gershom or the grandson of Moses (Judges 18:30).

A New Testament example of apostasy is found in Rev 2:4-5 where Christ charged the church at Ephesus with having left its first love. Apparently, this sin represented a severe departure in Christ's eyes since He threatened to take away from the Ephesians their lampstand or sphere of influence unless they returned to Him. It is again surprising to observe that it was none other than the church of Ephesus involved in this departure. Paul founded the church at Ephesus on his third missionary journey during a three-year stay in Ephesus. Ephesus had been the recipient of the ministries of Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila, Timothy, and even John.⁴ Ephesus also had three letters addressed to her. Each of these letters eventually became part of the New Testament canon (Eph, 1–2 Tim). Yet, despite this solid theological foundation, Ephesus eventually departed from Christ. In sum, one would never have guessed that Aaron, Jonathan, and Ephesus would have ever been involved in apostasy. Yet these are the very ones who led in the area of apostasy.

Therefore, no one is immune from apostasy. This fact is evidenced by the following rules given at the foundation of a well-known Christian school.

Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life (John 17:3) and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let

⁴ Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 133.

everyone seriously set himself by prayer in secret to seek it of Him (Prov. 2, 3). Everyone shall exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day that he shall be ready to give such an account of his proficiency therein.⁵

Most people are amazed to learn that these were the rules of Harvard given at the school's inception in 1636. Yet, spiritually speaking, the Harvard of today is quite different from the early Harvard. Over time, Harvard apostatized from its Christian roots. When founded, any prediction of the eventual drifting of the school from its biblical foundation would probably have been looked at as a gross overstatement. Yet such a departure is what has happened. Thus, as demonstrated through the examples of Jonathan, Aaron, Ephesus, and Harvard, apostasy knows no limits. To be continued in next month's article.

⁵ Rules of Harvard in 1636; quoted in David Barton, *Original Intent* (Aledo, TX: Wall Builder Press, 1996), 81.