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## THE APOSTASY

The history of the Church in the post-apostolic period can best be understood when studied in the light of the prophetic predictions concerning it. Such predictions are abundant and serious in the recognition of the apostasy—the departure from Christ—which seemed inevitable by the very nature of men. Isaiah, who had so accurately foretold the coming of the Christ and the nature of His work, warned, “Darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people” (Isaiah 60:2). Micah, in speaking of any time when the spiritual leaders of the people would lead them astray, said, “Therefore, night shall be unto you, that ye shall not have a vision; and it shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine; and the sun shall go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them. Then shall the seers be ashamed and the diviners confounded; yea, they shall cover their lips; for there is no answer of God” (Micah 3:6-7). In both of these, we see the prediction of darkness over the people.

Amos foresaw a time when human life would be held as cheap by the leaders of the people—a time of great injustice and inequity—a time in which, “We may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes” (Amos 8:6). He bears witness that God will not forget many of their works and prophecies, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land—not a famine of bread nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord; and they shall wander from sea to sea and from the north even to the east; they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord and shall not find it” (Amos 8:11-12).

Jesus warned of the same when He said, “Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you” (John 12:35). Some would say Christ was speaking of His own departure here because He proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world (see John 12:46). However, we note that He also said to His disciples, “I give unto you to be the light of the world” (Matthew 5:16). The light that Christ brought to the earth was the truth, the Word of God. His disciples, by sharing this truth, then could also become a light to the world. Thus, it was as Amos had said—the Word of God was to be taken away. When the light of God’s Word was gone, the natural result would be the darkness which had been predicted.

### APOSTOLIC PREDICTIONS

The apostles also saw what was to happen and warned the Church of the coming darkness. Paul warned the elders, “After my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29). These were outside forces that would seek to destroy the Church. He also charged, “Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). He left Timothy in Ephesus to “Charge some that they teach no other doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3). He warned of a time when men would “not endure sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3). He spoke of “perilous times” when there would be men, “having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof” (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Peter joined Paul in this admonition as he said, “There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in abominable heresies” (2 Peter 2:1). John foresaw the time when the Church would flee to the wilderness (see Revelation 12:5).

### THE APOSTLES SAW THE APOSTASY COMING

It did not take long for the forces of apostasy to find their place. Paul wrote, “The mystery of iniquity doth already work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7); “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel” (Galatians 1:6); and “Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8). John also noted, “Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 John 1:7).

## HISTORICAL PROGRESS

Apostasy, however, was not accomplished in a day. It took hundreds of years for false doctrine to replace the word of truth. This took place step by step, year by year, and century by century. The age of the apostles seems to have come to a close near the end of the first century, for we hear nothing of them after that. However, the Church continued to grow in spite of persecution, which took the lives of many and drove others into hiding. History shows that during the first three centuries after Christ it was truly dangerous to be a Christian.

It was during this period that real evidence of Paul's predictions began to be seen. There were indeed many who sought to pervert the gospel of Christ and draw away disciples after themselves. Changes in the doctrines of baptisms and the Lord's supper began to take place during this time. Infant baptism was introduced as early as A.D. 185, but it did not become a universal practice until the sixth century, despite earlier church sanction.

In the years that followed, many heresies entered the apostate church. Among these, we find Mary was called the mother of God, A.D. 438; priests dressed differently, A.D. 500; prayers offered to Mary, A.D. 593; holy water introduced, A.D. 682; ritual of kissing pope's toe introduced, A.D. 708; cardinals created, A.D. 817; transubstantiation of bread and wine declared, A.D. 1215; and baptism by sprinkling first legalized, A.D. 1311 (see *Catholic Encyclopedia*).

The church became an institution of force and fear. God was portrayed as a God of wrath, punishment, and vengeance. Men were held in fear of eternal burning. The church gained power in religious and civil matters. Even emperors and kings bowed before this power, for they dared not make war against it. An example of this is the case of Henry IV of Germany. Because of his revolt against Papal power, he lost his authority over his people.

Christ had promised the abundant life to man, but the Church which professed to be His was under apostate leaders. It controlled the world but brought no abundant life; in fact, there was probably less of this abundance than at any other time in recorded history. Indeed, the effects of apostasy were great. Darkness had covered the earth and gross darkness the people.

## THE REFORMATION

While the apostasy progressed, forces began to move in the hearts of men, which eventually resulted in the Reformation. One of the great men of this movement was Martin Luther. His serious devotion and study caused him to realize that the church had indeed departed from God. His first serious break with the church came with his preaching against the practice of selling indulgences. It was not his purpose to form a new church but simply to reform the old one and bring it back to God and truth.

Other men soon followed, each of them agreeing that Luther was right in his belief that the church had left God and needed to be brought back. However, they disagreed with Luther and each other as to just what was the truth. Each moved forward on the basis of personal convictions—convictions stemming from the opinions of man. It is little wonder that such confusion resulted.

## THE CRY FOR RESTORATION

As the work of reformation moved on, it became evident to many that it was not enough—the works of men could never bring the church back to God. Alexander Campbell proclaimed, "We argue that all Christian sects are more or less apostasized from the institution of the Saviour" (*Christian Baptist*, Vol. 5, p. 402). "The primitive gospel, in all its effulgence and power, is yet to shine out in its original splendor to regenerate the world" (*History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve*, p. 37). He taught the need of restoration: "Either some new revelation or some new development of the revelation of God must be made . . . We want the old gospel back, sustained by the ancient order of things" (*The Christian System*, p. 250).

In his day, Roger Williams denied that any ministry existed "which is authorized to preach the gospel to the impenitent or to administer the ordinances" (*Baptist History*, p. 461). He, too, looked for divine assistance to answer the need. "He conceived that the apostasy of antichrist hath so far corrupted all, that there can be no recovery out of that apostasy till Christ shall send forth new apostles to plant churches anew" (*Struggles and Triumphs of Religious Liberty*, p. 238).

John Wesley was another who recognized the weakness of man's attempts. He sensed the need of the gifts of the Holy Ghost "because the Christians had turned heathens again and had only a dead form left" (*Wesley Sermons*, Vol. 2, p. 266). He, too, looked for the restoration and taught, "What could God have done which He hath not done, to convince you that the day is coming, that the time is at hand, when He will fulfill His glorious promises, when He will arise to maintain His own cause and to set up His Kingdom over all the earth?" (*Wesley Sermons*, Vol. 2, p. 98).

## **GOD AT WORK**

We have seen how the forces of evil, the grievous wolves, entered the flock and how even the ministers of the church perverted the gospel and thus led the church away from Christ into the darkness of apostasy. The history of the corrupt church in those centuries is indeed sad.

However, this was not always to be. Although the reformers did not succeed in their effort to bring the church back to God, they must have been moved by His Spirit at least to recognition of the apostasy. It must have been this same Spirit that gave them strength to stand against the power of the apostate church. While it is to be regretted that even in Reformation they increased their apostasy in some areas of belief, it is to be noted that they succeeded in turning the attention of sincere men to a study of God's Word. As a result of their works, there came about a form of freedom in religious thinking. Without this, the Restoration which was to come could never have been received by men. Thus, we see the hand of God at work, even in reformation, patiently preparing men's hearts for the fuller revelation of truth.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What is the apostasy?
2. The gross darkness predicted by Isaiah was the natural result of what things?
3. Paul gave two great warnings to the elders of Ephesus concerning the coming apostasy. What were those warnings?
4. In the years that followed the baptism of Emperor Constantine, several heresies entered the church. List four of them.
5. What are the most significant contributions of the reformers?
6. What standard did Paul give to the Galatian Saints by which they could judge whether or not any doctrine was true?
7. What great change in belief about God took place during the apostasy?
8. Aside from the fact that the church of the middle ages departed from the doctrine of Christ, what is the greatest evidence that it was no longer Christ's Church?