

Apostasy of the Church, Last Days

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.

Apostasy: *apo*, "away from"; *histemi*, "to stand"; thus, "to stand away from"

Definition: a movement within the church representing a departure from known or previously embraced truth. It pertains to the spiritual temperature within the Church...not to the unsaved world. It's an internal condition of the Church. It's a departure from sound doctrine and godly behavior (the first is the cause of the latter?).

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).

There is a large volume of Scripture passages in the Epistles alone that are devoted to the issue of apostasy: Rom 1:18-32; 10; 16:17-18; 2 Cor 11:1-15; 13:5; Gal 1:6-9; 5:1-12; Phil 3:2,18-19; Col 2:4-23; 1 Tim 1:3-7; 4:1-3; 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:11-26; 3:1-9; 4:15; Titus 1:10-16; Heb 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.

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 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). [Lewis Sperry Chafer]

In summarizing NT 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 sound doctrine to a false or unhealthy teaching that does not line up with Scripture. Second, apostasy relates to behavior. Anyone who professes to be a believer and does not follow the NT ethic is viewed as an apostate. Simply put, apostasy has to do with both *word* and *deed*.

General Characteristics of Apostasy

1. It's a sign of the last days
2. It's warned against repeatedly in the NT
3. It impacts every major doctrine
4. It's internal
5. It knows no limits in terms of who becomes involved in it
6. It can happen quickly
7. It's Satanically energized
8. It's destructive
9. It makes life difficult for the man of God
10. It can be guarded against

(1) It's a sign of the last days

When we speak of signs of the end times, many concern God's future program for Israel. However, apostasy is one of the specific scriptural signs given to indicate that the church is nearing the completion of her earthly mission.

2 Tim 3:1 - "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come." In his last will and testament, Paul does not predict a last days revival, but rather the coming of dangerous times

2 Tim 3:13 - But evil men and imitators will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." Paul seems to anticipate an increasing drift away from truth in the last days.

Other Scriptures that note the evil character at the end of the Church Age: 1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-6; Jude. Interestingly, virtually all comments about the last days apostasy of the church come from epistles written shortly before the death of their writer.

The NT pictures the condition within the Church at the end of the age by a system of denials:

- Denial of **GOD** (Luke 17:26; 2 Tim 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 Tim 4:1-2; Jude 3)
- Denial of **SOUND DOCTRINE** (2 Tim 4:3-4)
- Denial of **THE SEPARATED LIFE** (2 Tim 3:1-7)
- Denial of **CHRISTIAN LIBERTY** (1 Tim 4:3-4)
- Denial of **MORALS** (2 Tim 3:1-8,13; Jude 18)
- Denial of **AUTHORITY** (2 Tim 3:4)

The Kingdom Parables in Matt 13 seem to predict an apostasy in the last days:

- The Parable of the Sower teaches that the gospel will be preached throughout the Church Age with various results depending upon how the hearer's heart has been prepared (13:1-9,18-23).
- The Parable of the Tares teaches that it will be difficult to distinguish between the saved and the unsaved, and the separation between them will not transpire until the conclusion (13:24-30,36-43).
- The Parable of the Mustard Seed teaches that the Church will experience great numerical and geographic expansion from a humble beginning (13:31-32).
- The Parable of the Leaven teaches that the Church will experience increasing moral and doctrinal corruption as the age progresses (13:33). Unfortunately, many people miss this important point because they associate the leaven as something good rather than sin, which is how it's portrayed everywhere else in Scripture.
- The Parable of the Hidden Treasure teaches that national Israel (Ex 19:5) will remain in unbelief only to be converted at the end of the tribulation (13:44).
- The Pearl of Great Price teaches that the Lord will gain a treasure from among the Gentiles throughout the Church Age (13:45-46).
- The Dragnet teaches the same message as the Wheat/Tares...mainly, the co-existence of both good and evil until they are separated at the end of the age (13:47-50).
- The Parable of the Householder depicts a man bringing both old and new treasures from his house teaches us that these previous 7 parables, describing fresh and new truths about the course of the Church Age, must be considered alongside what prior revelation teaches about the future kingdom in order to understand God's total program (13:51-52).

In the seven letters to the churches in Revelation, Laodicea likely represents the condition of the final stage of the church. It 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 (Rev 17:1-7) that will be used by the Antichrist to gain world power.

(2) It's warned against repeatedly in the NT

Apostasy is a massive topic in the NT. Surprisingly, it's one of the most-often mentioned subjects in the NT. It's difficult to read long in the NT before encountering warnings

concerning apostasy.

Warnings:

- Gospels (Matt 13)
- Early Church (Acts 20:29-31)
- Pauline Epistles (Rom 16:17-18; Gal 1:6-9; 2 Cor 11:1-15; Phil 3:2,18-19; Col 2:8; 1 Tim 4; 2 Tim 3-4; Titus 1:10)
- Jewish Epistles (Heb 2:1-4; 2 Peter 2-3; Jude; 1 John 4:1-6)
- Rev 2-3: 5 of the 7 churches needed rebuke from Christ due to their apostate condition

Entire NT books were written solely for the purpose of warning believers concerning apostasy:

- Galatians was written to warn believers against the Judaizers
- Colossians for the purpose of warning Christians about the Colossian heresy
- Hebrews to keep the readers from leaving the full revelation of Christ and lapsing back into Judaism
- Jude and 2 Peter were written as warnings concerning apostasy in general

(3) It impacts every major doctrine

There are no doctrines of Scripture that apostates won't deny:

- Apostates will deny the faith (1 Tim 4:1)
 - Definite article ("the") before faith indicates that apostates will even deny the very faith of Christianity
- Apostates will deny God (Jude 4)
- Apostates will deny Christ and His atoning death (2 Peter 2:1)
- Apostates will deny sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3)
- Apostates will deny God's role in Creation (2 Peter 3:5)
 - *thelo*, "desire" in this verse expresses their desire to push God out of their thinking about creation
- Apostates will deny God's future return (2 Peter 3:4)
- Apostates will deny the resurrection of Christ (2 Tim 2:17-18)

There are no doctrinal "sacred cows" as far as apostates are concerned. Everything that can be denied will be denied.

(4) It's Internal

In Acts 20:18-35, Paul, at the end of his third missionary journey, stopped in Miletus to address the Ephesian elders. During this address, Paul sounded the alarm concerning

apostasy. He was serious, since he had warned them day and night, with tears, for a period of three years (20:31).

Acts 20:29 - 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.

Jude 4 - For certain persons have crept in unnoticed...

If you're looking for apostasy, you shouldn't look to the unsaved world...you should look to the church, behind pulpits, in Christian publications, and in Christian schools.

(5) It knows no limits in terms of who becomes involved in it

The very people or groups that one would initially think would not be involved in apostasy may be the ones "leading the charge" into apostasy.

In Ex 32:1-10, as Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days receiving the law, the children of Israel quickly apostatized by constructing a golden calf. Aaron, the high priest, was the ringleader.

Judges 17-18 records a wandering Levite (Jonathan, son of Gershom, grandson of Moses, Judges 18:30) who helped introduce the first instance of idolatry into Israel after the conquest of Joshua. It was first introduced into a household, then into the entire tribe of Dan.

In Rev 2:4-5, Christ charged the church of Ephesus for leaving its first love. Apparently this was a serious departure since He threatened to take away their lampstand (sphere of influence). Paul founded the church of Ephesus on his 3rd missionary journey, after a 3-year stay. There are 4 NT letters addressed to this church (Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy), and Christ's letter in Revelation. Despite the solid theological foundation laid by Paul, the church led in the area of apostasy and their lampstand has since been removed.

(6) It can happen quickly

Gal 1:6: I marvel that you are *turning away so soon* from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a *different gospel*. Paul's writing of Galatians was ~1 year after planting the church.

In response to the children of Israel, and Aaron the high priest, apostatizing so quickly while Moses was on Sinai, Ex 32:8 says: "They have turned aside *quickly* out of the way which I have commanded them."

(7) It's Satanically Energized

Satan is the true culprit behind apostasy:

- 2 Cor 11:3: But I fear, lest somehow, as the *serpent* deceived Eve by his own craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.
 - Paul is concerned that in the same way that Satan led away Eve into sin, he would also lead the Corinthian church into apostasy.
- 1 Tim 4:1: Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.

Apostasy typically happens when Satan places ideas into the minds of fallen men, typically in positions of ecclesiastical influence, in order to push the church further into apostasy. Satan also uses believers to accomplish this goal. His ability to use carnal believers, who cater to their sin nature, is apparent in the following passages:

- Matt 16:23 - Jesus rebuked Peter when he attempted to persuade Christ not to die on the cross
- Acts 5:3-4 - Peter noted that Satan filled the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira, prompting them to lie to the Holy Spirit
- Eph 4:26-27 - Paul exhorted the Ephesian believers not to harbor bitterness, but instead forgive, otherwise they would give Satan a place of influence in their lives

Satan uses Christians in spheres of influence to cause the church to depart from truth and to get the church off-message and off-mission. Once this happens, the church loses its effectiveness in the world.

God's purpose for the Church is three-fold:

1. Glorify God (Eph 3:21)
2. Edify the Saints (Eph 4:11-16)
3. Worldwide evangelism and disciple-making (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15)

The Church operates with power only to the extent that it functions within these purposes. When the Church is moved off-message or off-mission, it loses its power and effectiveness.

If Satan through apostasy can cause the Church to take on tasks that God never delegated to it, or become something that God never designed her to be, then he will have crippled the Church in accomplishing its earthly mission.

(8) It's Destructive

Scripture often analogizes apostasy to familiar dangers from the physical world:

- 1 Tim 1:19-20 compares apostasy to a shipwreck: "...which some have rejected, concerning faith have suffered *shipwreck*, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."
- Acts 20:29 compares apostasy to ravenous wolves entering the flock and gorging on innocent sheep: "I know that after my departure *savage wolves* will come in among you, *sparing not the flock*."
- 2 Tim 2:17-18 compares apostasy to cancer: "And their message will spread like *cancer*. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they have *overthrown* the faith of some."
 - "overthrown" is the same one used in John 2:15 in reference to how Christ overturned the moneychanger's tables in the temple. Like the overturning of a table, apostasy is a destabilizing influence.

(9) It makes life difficult for the man of God

Apostasy in the church is a difficulty for those who desire to remain loyal to Biblical truth:

- 2 Tim 3:13: But evil men and imitators will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.
- 2 Tim 4:3-4: For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

These verses bear a striking resemblance to the Church Growth Movement. The Church Growth Movement concludes that if the Church is repackaged to satisfy the yearnings of the unsaved, people will flock to church thereby causing it to grow. While no one disputes that large crowds can be accumulated through the use of this methodology, the real question is, "does the end result represent God's definition of what His Church is supposed to be?"

In actuality, what transpires is that the spirit of the world invades the church. Consequently, 2 Tim 3:2-4 represents the characteristics that people in the church begin to exhibit. The central thrust of these verses is that men will become lovers of self (3:2a) rather than lovers of God (3:4b). Everything else in between these phrases describes the characteristics of people when they reach this state (3:2b-4a). Therefore, Paul predicts that when men become lovers of self rather than God, they will exhibit the following characteristics: love of money, boastfulness, arrogance, blasphemy, disobedience to parents, unthankfulness, lovelessness, unholiness, unforgiveness, slanderous, lacking self-control, brutality, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, and pleasure lovers.

While many interpreters mistakenly apply these verses to the outside world, the world has always been this way. If the world has always exhibited these qualities, how could the world manifesting these qualities constitute a sign? Instead, Paul is describing what people *within the church* will become like once the spirit of the world invades the Church.

Some may question whether it is possible that Christ's Church could so depart from truth that she is no longer governed by Him but rather by a non-Christian philosophy. Yet this very scenario was what was transpiring within the Church at Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22).

There, Christ is depicted as standing outside the door of the Church, knocking on the door, and seeking re-entry (Rev 3:20).

It is in this context of the spirit of the world controlling the Church that Paul warns, "But know this, in the last days *perilous times* will come" (2 Tim 3:1, italics added). We might ask, "perilous for whom?" Since 2 Timothy is a pastoral letter, we can safely conclude that the peril or danger that Paul predicts will arrive will be the adversity experienced by Timothy as well as all other faithful pastors. Why will Timothy and others experience peril once the spirit of the world invades the church? The man of God will experience difficulty in such a setting because he will be attempting to declare God's truth before people who are not interested in listening to it but are rather more interested in having their ears tickled. Thus, pastoral work will become difficult, as the pastor will find himself battling with his own congregation.

This fact explains why Pauline warnings of apostasy are accompanied by warnings of difficulty for the pastor. For example, reference has already been made to Paul's prediction that "evil men and imposters" will grow "worse and worse" (2 Tim 3:13). However, the preceding verse says, "Yes, and all who desire to live a Godly life in Christ Jesus *will suffer persecution*" (2 Tim 3:12). Similarly, reference has already been made to Paul's warning that the church will no longer support a platform for the teaching of sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4). Interestingly, the subsequent verse says, "but you be watchful in all things, *endure afflictions...*" (2 Tim 4:5). Paul warns Timothy of these coming dangers since Timothy is the one who must bear up under them as a spiritual leader attempting to be faithful to God in the midst of a church that is gradually moving away from truth.

(10) It can be guarded against

Not succumbing to the wave of apostasy requires both aggressive action and a return to the preeminence and authority of Scripture in our personal lives and local churches.

Prov 27:12: A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself; the simple pass on and are punished.

1 Thess 5:21: Test all things; hold fast to what is good.

- Believers can protect themselves from apostasy by simply comparing everything we hear with Scripture

Deut 13:1-3a: If there arise among you a prophet, or dreamer of dreams, and he giveth thee a sign or wonder, And the sign or the wonder comes to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them; You shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet...

- The test of truth is not an experience or miraculous manifestation from a prophet. Rather, truth is determined by whether the prophet's message is in conformity with prior divine revelation.
- This is especially important for today's experience-based Christian, which is prone to attach divine authority to a message based upon an experience, a miraculous manifestation or even the giftedness of the speaker.

Gal 1:8: But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

- Paul notes that divine authority to anyone, including himself or even an angel, if that teaching contradicted what prior revelation taught concerning the gospel.

Acts 17:11: These were more fair minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

- The Bereans understood the principle of testing all self-proclaimed source of truth by prior revelation

Rev 2:2: And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.

- Christ commended the Ephesian church for their unwillingness to accept something as true simply because it claimed to have come from an apostolic source. He also praised them for testing all things through the light of prior revelation.

1 John 4:1: Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

- John sought to insulate his readers from gnosticism by teaching them to test all things by prior divine revelation.
- However, the believer only has an ability to test things to the extent that they are familiar with what God has already revealed in Scripture. A lack of familiarity with the real thing leads to an inability to recognize the false. Scriptural illiteracy prevents Christians from being able to discern truth from error, consequently making them vulnerable to apostasy.

Heb 5:14: But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

- This verse views the capacity for spiritual discernment emanating from familiarity with Scripture as a sign of maturity

Passivity makes resisting apostasy impossible.

Preeminence and Authority of Scripture

2 Tim 2:15: Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

- This pastoral injunction seems so simple, yet this is the area where the contemporary American church is most negligent
- Paul discussed the reality of apostasy more in 2 Timothy than in any of his other letters. There, Paul exhorted Timothy to devote himself to Scripture:

Spurgeon once analogized returning to the Scripture in the local church to releasing a lion from its cage. Paul explained that the Word of God is not only profitable for our initial salvation but also for our sanctification and equipping (2 Tim 3:15-17). Thus, he pleaded with Timothy to preach the Word when it is both popular to do so and when it is not (2 Tim 4:2).

Of the items the early church gave themselves to such as prayer, evangelism, communion, and benevolence (Acts 2:41-47), the first item mentioned was a single-minded devotion to apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42). Why? Such a doctrinal focus equipped the church to fulfill all these other activities. Unless Scripture occupies a pre-eminent place in our lives and churches, spiritual maturity is an impossibility (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Peter 2:2).

The general trajectory of national Israel throughout the pages of the OT is one of rebellion and disobedience. However, there are a few recorded instances of a revival and a return to God. These seasons of refreshment are always marked by an important prerequisite: a return to Scripture. For example, the many reforms that took place in Josiah's day were preceded by not only the discovery of the Law in the temple after many years of neglect but also by a desire to honor and embrace it (2 Kings 22).

The great revival that broke out among the post-exilic community in Nehemiah's day (Neh 9-12) was preceded by Ezra the scribe standing upon a high platform in order to read and explain God's Word to God's people (Neh 8). The Protestant Reformation would likely never have taken place unless the reformers had focused upon God's Word alone and made it their ambition to build proper doctrine upon it.

Despite the encroachment of apostasy in our own day, we find that we have the ability to protect ourselves from its influence to the extent that we return to the fidelity, authority, and centrality of Scripture.

The common denominator for all anti-Christians is human experience set against God's revelation. Since biblical Christianity is rooted and grounded in the fact that Second Person of the Trinity became a man and entered history in order that He might die for man's sin as a substitutionary sacrifice in order to provide salvation to those who believe, it is important for unbelievers to shift focus away from the God-Man to human experience. Biblical Christianity has to be stripped of the historical facts of Scripture like creation, the fall, the flood, the call of Abram, the exodus, the conquest, the Temple, the incarnation, the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, as well as His second coming. In its place is the self-discovery through some religious discipline of the inner self. Nothing more than human experience.