

## WHY ARE THERE SO MANY DIFFERENT CHURCHES? Part 2 - The Apostasy Begins

We have begun a study of why there are so many different churches. Our goal in this study is to understand how we have come to the point of so many different churches all professing to follow Jesus, yet they are so divided doctrinally and often bitterly (not to mention the many other religions in the world that do not follow the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament). We began by showing that the church (i.e. kingdom) was established according to God's purpose (Ephesians 3:10-11) on the day of Pentecost, approximately A.D. 30, some 7 weeks after the resurrection of Jesus and shortly after He ascended to heaven. Last week we noted the growth of the church in its infancy as it spread throughout the world and as the gospel was preached in its completion and the New Testament was written. But we also noted concerns about apostasy as a number of warnings were written of things to come (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Acts 20:28-30, 2 Thess. 2:3-4, etc.).

Today, we want to examine the beginning of that apostasy. In this lesson we will notice what happened as the apostolic age drew to a close, what were some of the causes of apostasy, and false doctrines that developed during this time period

### I. The End of the Apostolic Age

a. What is the apostolic age? It refers to the time frame of the New Testament being written when apostles and their fellow peers, upon whom the apostles laid their hands (cf. Acts 8:14-19, Matthew 16:19, etc.), were still alive and speaking directly through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It was the age when the gospel was preached to every creature under heaven (Col. 1:23) as apostles went throughout the world.

b. The death of the apostles – what it meant.

i. **First, it meant the completion of the apostolic age.** This age came to its completion with the death of the last apostle and anyone whom they had laid hands upon to receive miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

ii. **Second, this also corresponds with the completion of the New Testament** (inspired writings – 1 Corinthians 13:8-12). NOTE: It was to the Apostles that Jesus spoke in John 16:13, etc.

iii. **Third, it meant that congregations and brethren had to now rely on the completed New Testament** as well as qualified elders and preachers to deal with doctrines, issues and problems. It became imperative that they respect the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) and acknowledge its completeness (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

iv. **Fourth, based on the warnings in some of the latter epistles, it meant that apostasy was already beginning to materialize.** In 2 Thessalonians 2:7, dealing the events that must happen for there to be a "falling away", Paul then notes, "*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work*", meaning events were already beginning to transpire toward apostasy, decades before inspiration was complete.

Consider that in Revelation 2 & 3, only 2 of the 7 churches were considered totally faithful. Two churches were challenged because of false doctrines being taught or tolerated – (Pergamos - 2:14-16 & Thyatira – 2:20-23) and three churches were rebuked for different degrees of indifference (Ephesus – 2:4, Sardis – 3:1-3, and Laodicea – 3:15-17).

Also in 3 John 9-10 describes men arising who desired preeminence and caused troubles within the church.

c. The end of this age is estimated at approximately A.D 100, just a few years after John's death. And apostasy begins.

### II. Causes of Apostasy

a. **Judges 2:10, the "another generation" principle.** This text notes how Israel went into apostasy against Jehovah God because parents failed to adequately teach their children the law of Moses they needed to

keep. Let us NEVER forget that the church is always only ONE generation away from apostasy – IF WE fail to teach the next generation properly.

While not specifically stated, I suspect that part of cause of apostasy WAS a failure to adequately teach the next generation. Question: IS TODAY ANY DIFFERENT?

b. **Persecutions.** The scriptures warn Christians that they will be persecuted. In fact, Paul told Timothy in his final epistle [the same epistle in which he warned of apostasies – 2 Tim. 4:3-4] that “all who desire to live godly will suffer persecution.” (2 Timothy 3:12). Many Christians knew what they were getting into when they became Christians. Throughout the book of Acts we read of persecutions, primarily at the hands of Jewish leaders. In Acts 8:4 we are told that after Stephen was stoned to death, disciples went everywhere preaching the word. And we continue to read of their persecutions.

BUT the worst persecutions were yet to come. As time progressed, the Roman Empire became increasingly hostile toward Christianity.

- i. The first Roman emperor to engage in major persecutions of Christianity was **Nero**. The Roman historian Tacitus said that he in order to divert attention from his own tyranny blamed the Christians for a major fire that destroyed a great part of the city in A.D. 67. As a result many were “convicted” and sentenced to death. Deaths included being sewn in animal skins and mauled by dogs, nailed to crosses and set fire to so as to provide nocturnal lights (Fox’s Book of Martyrs, Chapter 2, Part 1). It was around the time of his persecution that both Peter and Paul are believed to have been executed. Tradition holds that Peter was crucified upside down, requesting such because he did not deem himself worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Jesus. Paul is believed to have been beheaded. (Fox’s Book of Martyrs, Chapter 1)
  - ii. The second persecution that occurred during apostolic times was at the hands of **Domitian**. Domitian reigned from (A.D 89-96). His persecutions too were harsh. He caused hundreds of Christians to be put to death because they would not denounce Christianity and acknowledge their pagan deities. It was during his reign that John was exiled to Patmos (Rev. 1:9). Some historians also attribute his persecutions to the deaths of Timothy and Nicodemus.
  - iii. It is believed that most of the Apostles died violent deaths being persecuted. In fact, the only apostle believed to have died of old age was John.
  - iv. Fox’s Book of Martyrs records a total of 10 emperors who persecuted Christians from the time of Nero (A.D. 67) to about A.D. 313 when Constantine once and for all put an end to persecutions in the Roman Empire.
  - v. What does this have to do with the history of the church? **Persecutions can contribute to apostasy** by causing some to renounce their faith to save their lives or compromise the truth to lighten your load. Consider John 12:42 concerning some who believed in Jesus.  
Remember also John 6:66 which records an occasion when some of the disciples of Jesus walked with Him no more.
  - vi. **LESSON:** Even facing persecutions, we cannot deny our Lord and be pleasing to Him. Consider Revelation 2:10, with an alternate interpretation. Be faithful to the point of dying.- Revelation 2:10, etc.
- c. Apostasies started even before the New Testament was completed. As already noted, several books of the New Testament dealt with specific false doctrines that were affecting brethren. These doctrines include:

- i. **Gnosticism.** The book of 1 John is believed to have been written to combat Gnosticism. This religious philosophy taught false doctrine about who Jesus was. Its premise was first that matter and all things physical are evil and that God, being good was separate from the world. Thus when Jesus was born, His flesh was evil, but at some point in His life (possibly His baptism), the Spirit of God entered Him and influenced Him until just before He died when it left Him. This philosophy also taught that salvation was found through much knowledge. **Nelson’s Bible Dictionary** describes this by saying, “According to the Gnostics, the aim of salvation is for the spirit to be awakened by knowledge so the inner man can be released from his earthly dungeon and return to the realm of light where the soul becomes reunited with God. As the soul ascends, however, it needs to penetrate the cosmic spheres which separate it from its heavenly destiny. This, too, is accomplished by knowledge. One must understand certain formulas which are revealed only to the initiated.”

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Because of the distinction between flesh and Spirit, some Gnostics reasoned that with knowledge they could engage in all sorts of immoral and worldly practices. John addressed BOTH of these doctrines in his 1<sup>st</sup> epistle in 2:22-23 – concerning who Christ is and 1 John 3:4-10 which warns that he who

commits sins commits lawlessness. Nevertheless, this movement gained momentum well into the second century and remained until about the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Its influences affected many so-called believers in Christ.

CONSIDER the implications of this attitude today: There are many who are willing to serve Christ as long it does not demand change. But when they are caught in immoral or sinful conduct which they don't want to give up (such as M-D-R, social drinking, etc.), they conveniently reason away God's word. Many argue, "I can't help it!" And in much of the religious world, the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" permits this attitude.

- ii. **Ebionism** – is the doctrine that was held by some Jewish Christians. Some believed that Jesus was the Messiah while others thought of Him only as a prophet. They still considered themselves God's chosen people and therefore better than the Gentiles. Some were willing to tolerate the Gentiles, but demanded that they be circumcised and conform to other parts of the Law of Moses. Others still wanted nothing to do with the Gentiles. Some held many views similar to Gnosticism.

The Books of Romans, Galatians and Hebrews all deal with this false doctrine.

- iii. **Montanism** – was a religion that originated in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century and lasted until about the 6<sup>th</sup> (or 8<sup>th</sup>) century. These followers believed in miracles, gifts, prophecies and direct revelation of the Holy Spirit to them which superseded the teachings of the apostles.

They also adopted an overly strict (going beyond the scriptures) doctrine for their adherents. They were one of the first groups to teach a 1000 year reign of Christ upon the earth. And they also believed in Asceticism. Other than these, they espoused many doctrines that the developing Catholic Church taught.

- iv. **Asceticism** – a doctrine of rigid self-discipline and denial by which one believed they would be able to overcome the flesh. They held to the idea that suffering is good and the more you suffer the better. They took many good things to an extreme. They taught fasting, poverty and celibacy as well as other things. This doctrine eventually led to the idea of monasteries where monks would isolate themselves from the world.

d. Problems within the church

- i. **The rise of wealth can contribute to apostasy.** There were places and times when those within the "church" enjoyed peace and prosperity. And at times, as the influence of a wealthy society permeates the church, it can lead to a loosening of standards. Consider the church at Laodicea that was physically wealthy (Rev. 3:15-19). There are many dangers associated with wealth. Consider the warning of Paul in 1 Timothy 6:6-10, etc.
- ii. **Heresies** such as those mentioned above would in time permeate the church and cause the weak to be carried away (2 Peter 2:1-3)
- iii. **A change in the organization of the church.**

In our next lesson, we will examine that change in organization and note how it led to what is now the Catholic Church.