

Apostasy in the Church

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APOSTASY is a subject more often discussed than defined these days. Nevertheless, since the church is warned against apostasy repeatedly, it is a proper subject for discussion. First, however, a definition and some distinctions are necessary.

MEANING AND USAGE OF WORDS INVOLVED

Apostasia. The substantive occurs twice in the New Testament (Acts 21:12; 2 Thess. 2:3). The first instance concerns a departure from the teachings of Moses and the second refers to the eschatological apostasy. In the papyri it is used in the general sense of rebellion.¹ Liddell and Scott give the meaning as follows: "defection, revolt, especially in religious sense, rebellion against God, apostasy . . . 2. departure, disappearance. 3. distinguishing . . . 4. distance."² Sometimes it was used of political revolt. It is important to note that all lexicographers give the primary meaning as apostasy or rebellion and the secondary meaning as departure, which latter meaning is only found in classical Greek unless 2 Thessalonians 2:3 be a Biblical exception.³

Apostasis. This is the older substantive from which *apostasia* is directly derived. In the LXX it was used interchangeably with *apostasia* and always with the meaning of revolt (usually religious rebellion). This uniform usage in the LXX would indicate that the word came into the New Testament era with virtually the technical meaning of apostasy and exclusive of the meaning of departure.

Aphistemi. The verb to stand off, withdraw from, fall away, apostatize, occurs fourteen or fifteen times in the New

Testament (Luke 2:37; 4:13; 8:13; 13:27; Acts 5:37, 38; 12:10; 15:38; 19:9; 22:29; 2 Cor. 12:8; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 2:19; Heb. 3:12 and in some texts of 1 Tim. 6:5). These references reveal two basic meanings of the verb: (1) a personal (or in most cases physical) departure. This is the meaning in all but three references. In most instances the record speaks of a physical departure of a person from one place to another. (e.g., Luke 2:37; Acts 22:29). Sometimes it means departure from a course of action (e.g., Acts 5:38; 2 Tim. 2:19). (2) Apostasy or departure from the faith. This meaning occurs three times and in each instance the faith involved is true faith (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12). In the first reference the specific object from which people apostatize is the Word of God, the seed. In the second it is the true faith or Christian doctrine, and in the third it is the living God.

MEANING OF THE CONCEPT

The instances. From the word study it is obvious that apostasy is a departure. To be specific this involves two questions: (1) Departure from what? and, (2) What was the nature of the previous relationship which is broken by the departure? In no instance is the first question difficult to answer. In the five New Testament references where apostasy involves religion the thing or person from which the departure is made is quite clear in the text or context. The second question is the difficult one and has a direct bearing on one's definition of an apostate. Specifically, the question is this: Can an apostate have been a Christian believer? or, to put it another way, Can a Christian apostatize? In the parable of Luke 8 it seems clear that those on the rock who receive the Word with joy but who have no root and who in time of temptation fall away (apostatize) are not genuine believers, since the test for true faith is the production of fruit which was lacking in their cases. They did believe (v. 13) but this was not a fruit-bearing faith and therefore not a saving faith. In the second instance, the false teachers of 1 Timothy 4:1 are said to "depart from the faith." Whether they ever possessed (in contrast to professed) the faith is not specifically revealed in that passage. However, the false teachers described by Jude (who were likely the first to fulfill the prophecy of Paul in 1 Timothy 4) are adjudged by Jude to be unsaved. He discerns them to be

¹ Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, 68-69.

² *Greek-English Lexicon*, 218-19.

³ Cf. E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture*, 67-71.

without the Holy Spirit (v. 19), and "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His" (Rom. 8:9b). Those who are addressed in Hebrews 3:12 are not yet themselves apostates but are professing church members who are being warned against apostasy which stems from an evil heart of unbelief. The writer obviously believes that apostasy was a very real danger for some of these readers. This is most naturally understood in the light of the Lord's parable of the sower of Luke 8:4-15. In other words, there is always the possibility of a professing Christian renouncing that which he professed. He receives the Word but since it does not bear fruit in his life his experience proves to be merely self-regeneration rather than Spirit regeneration (cf. Jas. 2:26). The fact that these readers of Hebrews are addressed as brethren does not necessarily show that they were genuine believers, for how else could a writer address the people of the church(es) even though he recognized that there were unbelievers among them? Therefore, this warning concerning apostasy is to the professing element in this group(s). The apostasy of Acts is not pertinent to this discussion since it was quite proper to apostatize from Moses to Christ. The reference in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 shows that the departure will be from God and it will be by unbelievers (v. 12).

The definition. Thus, apostasy is a departure from truth previously accepted and it involves the breaking of a professed relationship with God.

The characteristics. Several other characteristics of apostasy are evident in these passages.

There is an objective, well-understood, and previously believed standard of truth from which the apostates depart. This is evident in the three references where religious apostasy is involved.

The departure is willful. The very word implies it and the actions and life of apostates show it (particularly 1 Tim. 4). Thus apostasy involves both the mind and the will.

The distinctions. An apostate is distinguished from a professed believer who upon discovery of further truth accepts it. The apostate would reject it, rather than accept it. The volitional element of rejection is not present in the professed believer such as those of Acts 19:1-6.

An apostate is not the same as a New Testament heretic. The noun *heretic* is used only one time in the New Testament (Titus 3:10), but the adjective is used two times (1 Cor. 11:19 and Gal. 5:20). The word means a willful choosing for one's self which results in a party division. Heresy belongs to the works of the flesh which can and often are performed by carnal Christians (Gal. 5:20). Sometimes this may be used for good so that those who are not involved in heresy will stand out in the churches (1 Cor. 11:19). Toward a heretic the Scriptures really command a surprisingly lenient attitude—admonish twice, then ignore (Titus 3:11). Apparently, then, in New Testament times the heretic was a carnal Christian who espoused error which brought factions into the church. Thus he was distinguished from an apostate who is not a Christian and whose departure was from the complete body of Christian truth which put him outside the church, rather than leaving him part of a faction within the church. In today's usage, probably heretic and apostate would be used interchangeably by most people.

An apostate, according to the definition, would be different from a carnal Christian in that the latter is "in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1) while the apostate is not.

The concept. Of course the concept of apostasy is not limited to the references in which the word is used. The word study serves as a guide in forming the concept which may then be used in discovering other instances where apostasy is described. For instance, it is quite obvious that Satan is an apostate. He knew the truth and deliberately departed from it (Isa. 14:12-15). The Pharisees who repudiated the Lord, though not specifically called apostates, fit the characteristics (Matt. 12:24). The man of sin is the climax of human apostasy. He must have known the truth in order to be able to set up his counterfeit religion as he will do in the tribulation days (2 Thess. 2:4). Thus any discussion of apostasy should properly include not only the passages which use the words but other passages which fit the characteristics. Other examples of apostasy in the New Testament would be (1) the many disciples that went back (John 6:66), (2) Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:19-20), (3) Demas (2 Tim. 4:10), (4) false teachers of the last days (2 Pet. 2:20-21), and (5) the

apostate religious system of the tribulation days (Rev. 17).

THE PRESENT APOSTASY IN THE CHURCH

While each of the many manifestations of apostasy in both Testaments is worth-while studying, we will limit ourselves to a consideration of three forms of apostasy which are eschatological. These considerations are not the distinctive teaching of dispensationalism though undoubtedly a dispensational approach to the Scriptures sharpens the outlook toward them and gives a perception of current events which is not seen by many Christians. The first to be considered is the contemporary apostasy in the church.

Scriptural basis for this apostasy. Relevant Scriptures are 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-7; 2 Peter 3:3-7; 1 John 3:18-23; Jude (esp. v. 19).

The time of this apostasy. The apostasy in the church is said to occur in the last days. Several expressions are used in this connection. In commenting on *husterois kairois*, latter times, in 1 Timothy 4:1 Ellicott says: "This expression, used only in this place, is not perfectly synonymous . . . with *eschatais hemeraiis*, 2 Timothy 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3 (not Rev.), James v. 3 (comp. *kairo eschato*, 1 Pet. 1:5, *eschatos chronos*, Jude 18); the latter expression . . . points more specifically to the period immediately preceding the completion of the kingdom of Christ; the former only to a period future to the speaker. . . . In the apostasy of the present the inspired Apostle sees the commencement of the fuller apostasy of the future. In this and a few other passages in the NT *kairos* appears to be nearly synonymous with *chronos*. . . ."4 Thus the apostasy in the church could have begun, and indeed did, when the church began, but it will increase in scope during the church age and climax at the end. This is evident, for John wrote of antichrists in his own day (1 John 2:19) and Paul looked ahead to widespread religious and moral declension in a day future to his own (2 Tim. 3:1-7).

The source of the doctrine of this apostasy. The source of apostate teaching is demonic. The doctrines which demons teach are those which the apostates teach in the church (1 Tim. 4:1). From 1 John 4:3 it appears that the demonic spirits directly empower the antichrists as well as supply them

4 C. J. Ellicott, *The Pastoral Epistles of St. Paul*, 54.

with the source material for teaching. This is corroborated by the fact the future antichrist is given "his power, and his throne and great authority" by the dragon, Satan (Rev. 13:2).

The substance of the doctrine of this apostasy. (1) Denial of the doctrine of the Trinity (1 John 2:22-23). "A common 'Gnostic' theory was that 'the aeon Christ' descended upon the man Jesus at His Baptism, and left Him before the Passion. Those who held such a doctrine denied that 'Jesus was the Christ'; and in so denying, denied the union of the divine and human in one Person. . . . The denial of the personal union of true manhood and true Godhead in Christ involves the denial of the essential relations of Fatherhood and Sonship in the Divine Nature."⁵ (2) Denial of the truth of incarnation (1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7). The true union of God and man in Jesus Christ is a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith and its denial is a characteristic of apostasy promoted by antichrists. (3) Denial of Christian liberty (1 Tim. 4:3). This takes two forms—forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats. (4) Denial of the doctrine of the return of Christ (2 Pet. 3:4).

The apostasy is also characterized by a denial of the return of Christ. For instance, Fosdick said, "I do not believe in the physical return of Jesus."⁶ In the last days, the reason for this denial is laid to belief in uniformitarianism—a principle in wide acceptance today.

The morality of this apostasy (2 Tim. 3:2-5). (1) Love of self. God is replaced by self. (2) Love of money. This follows from the first, for if self is loved primarily then the object of life will become the gratification of selfish desires. (3) A spirit of pride. (4) Blasphemy. (5) Disobedience to parents. (6) Lack of thankfulness. (7) Lack of holiness. (8) Without natural affection. (9) Unceasing enmity so that man cannot be persuaded to enter into a covenant. (10) Slandering. (11) Lack of self-control. (12) Savagery (the word means untamed, wild, and fierce). (13) Opposition to goodness. (14) Traitors. (15) Headiness (rash, headstrong, recklessness). (16) Highmindedness (the word literally means to raise a smoke). (17) Love of pleasure. (18) Pretense of worship but lack of godliness.

⁵ B. F. Westcott, *Epistles of John*, 75.

⁶ H. E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible*, 104.

THE APOSTASY OF THE FUTURE CHURCH

The meaning of Babylon (Rev. 17). Babylon has a three-fold meaning in Scripture. Historically, it meant the great city on the Euphrates River or the kingdom. Prophetically, it also refers to a great city or commercial empire (Rev. 18). Symbolically, it apparently refers to some aspect of Roman power (1 Pet. 5:13). Its meaning in Revelation 17 has been disputed from the beginning of Christian interpretation. Older commentators have referred it to the evil world, making little distinction between the viewpoints of Revelation 17 and 18. The city and its commercial activities is the main emphasis in this view. Others have identified Babylon in Revelation 17 with Rome; that is, with the power of imperial Rome. This identification is based on the reference to the seven hills of 17:9. Since the time of the Reformation the majority of commentators have identified Babylon with the papacy.⁷

Some commentators do not restrict the identification to the papacy but rather see in Babylon of Revelation 17 apostate Christendom as a whole. This is the view of most dispensationalists, but it is not restricted to dispensationalists. Torrance, for instance, whose understanding of Babylon emphasized the "evil world" aspect of it nevertheless calls it "an imitation Kingdom of God, based on the demonic trinity."⁸ However many details one may or may not insist on in the identification, it does seem clear that mystery Babylon, the mother of harlots, is a vast spiritual power so ecumenical or world-wide (including the Roman Church) that it can enter effectively into league with the rulers and forces of the world, and so anti-God as to exert its force to persecute successfully the saints of God.

The characteristics of mystery Babylon. Certain characteristics of Babylon of Revelation 17 are specified. (1) She is a harlot (v. 1). This obviously means she is unfaithful. She professes to be a system of religious truth and is in reality one of falsehood. This is confirmed by the name she assumes—"Mystery Babylon" (v. 5). (2) She is ecumenical (vv. 1, 15). She sits upon many waters which are explained as being

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 2:12; cf. Dante, *Inferno*, Cant. xix, 109-17 who referred it to the Rule of Rome under worldly and tyrannical popes.

⁸ T. F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*, 115.

"peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues." (3) She unites church and state under her sway (vv. 2-3). By granting her favors to the kings of the earth she is able to dominate the beast (v. 3) who is the head of the western confederation of nations (vv. 12-13) and whose dominion coincides with that of the whore (13:7). (4) She is a "whited sepulchre" (v. 4). Outwardly she has great grandeur but inwardly she is filled with filthiness. (5) She is a federation (v. 5). Her name is "The Mother of Harlots" which seems to indicate that she is a sort of mother church incorporating a number of equally false religious systems. It is because of this designation that many understand that the apostate church will be meshed with the Roman Catholic system, but not restricted to it. (6) She is a persecutor of the saints (v. 6). (7) She is destroyed completely by the beast (v. 16). This probably occurs at the middle of the tribulation period. It is described as a decisive and complete overthrow of the power of the apostate religious system.

Its relation to the Roman Catholic Church. Babylon is a system of religion. The Roman Church is likewise. Any relation to the two can only be shown by demonstrating that Babylonian religion is presently practiced by the Roman Church. This has been conclusively done by Alexander Hislop in his book *The Two Babylons*, and need not be reproduced here. Its principal feature (stemming from Nimrod's wife Semiramus and son Tammuz) was that of the cult of mother-child worship. This appeared in one form or another in Babylon, Phoenicia, Pergamos, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. It came into the experience of Israel through Jezebel and is severely condemned by the prophet Jeremiah (44:16-19, 25). The Emperor Constantine, who like the Caesars was the Pontifex Maximus, introduced it into the Christian church when he sanctioned Christianity in A.D. 312. Pagan Romans kept right on worshipping their mother-child god and following the same rituals of Babylon under the name of Christianity. The similarities to that which is perpetuated by the Roman Church are too clear not to see Rome as the pillar church in the final form of apostate Christendom (17:9-10).

Its relation to the contemporary ecumenical movement. With such a view of prophecy it is understandable why many

evangelicals view with alarm the ecumenical movement in Protestantism, to say nothing of the more recent softening of the Roman Catholic line. This is seen as a likely basis for the final apostate church. Therefore, it is not surprising that evangelicals are wary of trends in this direction. For instance, *The Sunday School Times* reported on the recent Christian Education Convention of the NCC held in St. Louis, February 11-14, 1963 as follows: "Here was co-operation, of course, but the NCC's spokesman told pastors something more than co-operation among the churches is desired: there must be unity of being, 'one fellowship, holding one faith, preaching one Gospel.' This will mean not several congregations in the neighborhood, but one. Is it strange, in view of this, that evangelicals are wary of the ecumenical movement?"⁹ The conclusion is well taken.

Some evangelicals today are inclusivists while others are very much separationists, and the dispensational element does not necessarily figure in the difference. However, it may figure in the motive in the case of separationists.

The arguments for inclusivism are several. (1) The example of the Lord preaching in the temple is often used (and likewise the earliest missionaries, including Paul). However, such an argument has an illogical reduction; namely, how to explain the eventual separation of Christianity from Judaism. (2) Union is the *summum bonum* for Christian activity. Doctrine, therefore, has to be subordinated, for whenever a doctrinal divergence appears the disputants are encouraged to subordinate their differences and find the least common denominator in order that the union be not impaired. Union is important, but never on a slipshod basis. "We may indeed be right and the other fellow wrong, but we dare not press our rightness to the point where his wrongness has not room."¹⁰ The danger is that the church may stand for less and less in order to be more and more widely merged.¹¹ (3) Bigness is better than smallness. But is this always true? Our Lord's band of disciples was not very big or influential. Indeed, bigness becomes an end in itself. Of course, per se there is noth-

⁹ *The Sunday School Times*, 105:10:2, March 9, 1963.

¹⁰ "Are Denominations a Sin?" C. Stanley Lowee, *Action*, January, 1963, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

ing wrong with being big, but it does not guarantee that a better or more efficient job will be done (witness big government), and it usually kidnaps those who are involved in it. There is nothing like the attractiveness of a big church with its multitudinous boards and agencies—especially for officials who are in them. A world-wide church soon and easily becomes a dream and a goal. The spread of Christianity throughout the first-century world was accomplished by the activities of local churches. The inclusivist trends towards union and bigness are suspect for these reasons in the eyes of many Christians, and particularly so when doctrinal compromise is involved.

The picture of an apostate church is in the Scriptures and the picture of contemporary ecclesiasticism is beginning to coincide with it. It is this that makes some fearful not only of what is to come but also of the trends leading to it.