

## PROPHECIES OF APOSTASY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

### Introduction

In the first lesson of this series we learned how God established a pure system of worship and service of God for the Children of Israel (the Law of Moses). We learned that God prophesied that they would depart from His pure system and He promised that He would forgive them if they repented and turned back to His will with all their heart. We also learned that these prophecies were fulfilled exactly as God said. We also learned that the Old Testament serves as an example for Christians. In this lesson we will see the same thing occurring in the New Testament. We will see God prophesying of an apostasy and pleading for them to return to His will with all their hearts. Three New Testament prophecies of apostasy will be considered in this lesson (these are not considered in chronological order).

#### The First Prophecy of an Apostasy (Acts 20:28-32)

When the apostle Paul addressed the elders of the church at Ephesus, he warned them of an apostasy (“to draw away” – Greek word with a similar meaning to our English word “apostasy.”) that would come from within the eldership (Acts 20:17-32). Note how he addressed the elders of the church at Ephesus in this passage.

Acts 20:28-32 Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Wherefore watch ye, remembering that by the space of three years I ceased not to admonish every one night and day with tears. 32 And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build *you* up, and to give *you* the inheritance among all them that are sanctified.

Paul is addressing the elders of the church (Acts 20:17) and is warning them of spiritual wolves that would enter the flock (church) to destroy it (Acts 20:29). These wolves would come from the eldership (Acts 20:30). This tells us that an apostasy would come from the eldership. Their motives would be to have a following: **to draw away the disciples after them** (verse 30). The elders are to watch out for this problem (Acts 20:31). Paul commends them to God: **And now I commend you to God** (Acts 20:32). This is probably a reference to the providence of God, but may be a reference to the miraculous (for the first century). Paul also commends them to the Scriptures: **and to the word of his grace**, (Acts 20:32). Paul plainly reveals that the Scriptures are all-sufficient to build up the church: **which** (the word of his grace) **is able to build you up**, (It is the word of God that edifies, nothing else edifies the church.) **and to give you the inheritance among all them that are sanctified** (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17 and 2 Pet. 1:3-4).

#### The Second Prophecy of an Apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-5)

Paul informed Timothy that there was to be an apostasy (“shall depart from” – KJV or “shall fall away from” – ASV This is the Greek word from which our word “apostasy” is derived.) from “the faith” by some in the church and revealed some of the aspects of this apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-5).

1 Tim. 4:1-5 But the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron; 3 forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from meats, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by them that believe and know the truth. 4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving: 5 for it is sanctified through the word of God and prayer.

This apostasy would occur in the later times, and it would entail four things: First, it would entail departing from “the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1). The expression “the faith” is defined for us in Gal. 1:22-24 (particularly in vs. 23). Note how Paul preached “the faith” but throughout the book of Galatians he preached “the gospel” (Gal. 1:6-9, 11, etc.). It is evident that “the gospel” is the same thing as “the faith.” This point is discussed extensively in my book *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Vol. II (pp. 396-397).

Second, it would entail “giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons (devils – KJV).” The idol worship of Corinth was demon worship (1 Cor. 10:20-21) as was the worship of Rev. 9:20. The word translated “demons” (ASV) is translated “gods” in Acts 17:18. The Greeks used the word translated “demon” to refer to a man who, by doing great feats would become a lesser god. Josephus said: “Demons, which are no other than the spirits of the wicked, which enter into men that are alive.” (Wars, 7, 6, 3). Philo spoke of demons as being both good and evil spirits and the same as human souls. (Philo, *On The Giants*, IV, 16; *A Treatise Concerning the World*, III) In the second century, Ignatius quotes Jesus as saying: “Lay hold and handle me, and see that I am not a demon without body.” (Ig. Smy. 3) Ignatius interprets a resurrected spirit to be a demon (he uses the word *demon* in the way it was used by the people of that time). These (Acts 17:18, Josephus, Philo, and Ignatius) can only be understood if one recognizes that the word *demon* is applicable to both good and evil spirits of human beings who had died. This is why Lk. 4:33 refers to an “unclean demon.” The act of praying to saints that is practiced by the Roman Catholic Church constitutes demon worship (prayer is an act of worship).

Third, they would forbid people to marry (1 Tim. 4:3). This is probably related to asceticism or to some claim that marriage is tainted in some manner (particularly the conjugal relations). This is precisely what the Roman Catholic Church teaches and practices. Even to this day they teach that conjugal relations in marriage are only for the purpose of procreation. In this they miss the obvious and even misapply the points of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:1-7).

Fourth, they command people to abstain from meat (1 Tim. 4:3). However meat is to be eaten when we receive it with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:3-5). The Roman Catholic Church teaches their members to abstain from certain meats. This may be related to asceticism also and is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church because other religious groups forbid the eating of certain meats (Seventh Day Adventists etc.).

The Third Prophecy of an Apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3)

In the second epistle that Paul wrote (2 Thessalonians), Paul warned of “the falling away” (Greek word from which our English word “apostasy” is derived.) and gave information about this apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3). This apostasy was to occur prior to the coming of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1-2).

This apostasy occurred because of a lack of love for the truth (2 Thess. 2:10). If one believes and loves the truth, he will conduct himself in accordance with that truth. He will not love error so much that he will teach error instead of truth. Love of the truth is necessary for one to be saved (2 Thess. 2:10).

Whoever this lawless one is, he was associated with a falling away (verse 3). This word is pronounced *apostasia*, note that our English word “apostasy” is a transliteration of this Greek word. A similar word is found in Acts 20:30 (to draw away). It is possible that Paul is referring to the same apostasy of Acts 20:30 here. Anyone who would substitute his will for the will of God does not love the truth. Anyone who would substitute the traditions of men for the will of God does not love the truth. The beginning point of any apostasy is the rejection of the absolute authority of the Word of God.

### Implicit Teachings of an Apostasy

When Jesus prayed for unity (Jn. 17:20-23), He implied that there would be a lack of unity. The first thing learned from this passage of Scripture is that unity is possible. The second thing learned from this passage of Scripture is that unity is desirable. The third thing learned from this passage of Scripture is that unity is necessary for the world to believe. Other Scriptures reveal that unity must be based upon the standard of the Word of God (Col. 3:17).

All passages warning of false teachers are implicitly teaching of the possibility of an apostasy. The warning of false prophets in Mt. 7:15-23 is a warning of a kind of false teacher. The first method by which we are to test them is by their fruits (Mt. 7:16-20). The second method by which we are to test them is by their doing the will of the Lord (Mt. 7:21).

Certain commands imply that an apostasy would occur. First, the command to **try the spirits** (1 Jn. 4:1) implies a possibility of an apostasy. Second, the command to mark false teachers also implies that there would be an apostasy (Rom. 16:17).

Various churches were in need of collective repentance. The church at Ephesus needed to repent (Rev. 2:5). The church at Pergamum needed to repent (Rev. 2:16). This implies that whole congregations could lose their status as congregations of the church of Christ by apostasy.

### Summary

The early disciples were warned about an apostasy, just as those in the Old Testament were warned. This apostasy came about because men failed to love the truth enough to obey it. We see this apostasy in several forms (various denominations). The Lord exhorted the church at Ephesus that He would remove their

candlestick (better translated “lampstand”) unless they repented (Rev. 2:5). However, if they repented, it is obvious that He would forgive them. Congregations of the Lord’s church today are in need of collective repentance (by turning back in their hearts to the Lord and returning to the practices of the Scriptures).

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