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Appendix C: New Testament Evidences and Prophecies of Apostasy in the First-Century Church

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Appendix C

NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCES AND PROPHECIES OF APOSTASY IN THE FIRST-CENTURY CHURCH

Noel B. Reynolds

It is usually assumed in discussions of a Christian apostasy that the early Christian church was able to hold on to its original teachings, behavioral standards, ordinances, authority, and organization well into the second or third century. Although problems are mentioned in many of the epistles, the usual assumption is that they were duly resolved, and that the church continued to grow and progress on the path which Jesus had established.

However, a careful reading of the New Testament text raises questions about this assumption. The text repeatedly reports serious divisions and only rarely reports resolutions (e.g. 2 Corinthians 7:9). Further, numerous passages indicate rather clearly that Paul, like Jesus before him, knew by prophecy that there would be a “falling away.” Could this have occurred in the early decades after the death of Christ?

As I have collected these statements and worked on this problem over the last several years, I have had a growing realization that the New Testament seems to document a process of disintegration that was virtually irreversible. In city

after city where Paul and other missionaries had established branches of the church, fast-talking, self-appointed men began to take over and to exploit the faith of Paul's converts for their own material and even lascivious benefit. The pattern appears to be common in the letters that Paul and others write to those members they see as being faithful. Further, the faithful often seem no longer to be in control of the local situation. The writings of Peter, James, Jude, and John all describe the same kinds of problems that Paul was addressing. We get a very consistent picture from all five witnesses of the decline of the church in their own lifetimes.

As we reflect on the administrative problems the early church faced, we have to be impressed with the impossibility of their task. No branch of the church had the benefit of experienced, second-generation leadership. Paul and the other apostles were themselves converts, with no established tradition or well of practical wisdom to draw on. Their writings make clear that the early leaders were not always on the same page themselves regarding major policy or administrative issues. And it is abundantly clear that they could only occasionally actually visit the scattered branches personally. Some letters show clearly that different social structures emerged, and there was nothing that anyone could do about it. Paul's emissaries were often ignored or demeaned. Even Paul's own authority is challenged repeatedly, and he finds it necessary to defend his claims to authority against the competition that has taken over locally.

The early church had no monthly reporting system and no instant communication. The mail system was slow, ad hoc, and unreliable. News was usually seriously out of date. Crises came and went on the local level without any intervention or guidance from the general authorities of the church. Travel

was slow, dangerous, and difficult. The organizational and logistical systems that have contributed so dramatically to the unity of the modern church did not exist. Small wonder that the Christian world was in disarray by the second century, and that third-century Christians turned in desperation to Greek philosophy to bring back the “unity of the faith,” that had been lost, probably even before the demise of the apostles. Small wonder that no writings have survived from that dark period in church history. The trials of faithful and humble Christians must have been excruciating as they witnessed the demise of Christ’s church at the hands of self-promoting and entrepreneurial fellow members who strove with one another for dominance and fashioned new doctrines and interpretations to justify their presumed authority.

Following is a selection of scriptural references divided into two groups and summarized for what they say about this question. The first group lists prophecies of apostasy, and the second group reports examples of apostasy among the followers of Christ and his apostles. While different readers will choose different passages, I have settled on nine passages that seem to me to rather clearly demonstrate foreknowledge of the impending demise of the church. The list below features thirty-four passages where the writer is describing significant and troubling examples of apostasy in the New Testament period. There are many others which might have been included, but these thirty-four seem to be the most obvious and require little interpretation to make the point. And thirty-four is more than adequate to make the point that these local apostasies are common and pervasive. There are hardly any passages commenting on the successful repression of such apostasies. For me, this all adds up to a convincing case that there was widespread apostasy in the church even before the deaths of the

apostles, and that this provides the most convincing and readily available explanation for the dark period at the end of the first century—almost no textual evidence remains from that period that would explain how the church had become so disunited and confused by the early second century—it would also explain why the apostles were not able to perpetuate themselves as a continuing organization of general authorities. This left the church to devolve into a weakly associated world of cities with bishops and elders as local leaders without any higher authority to coordinate them until the emergence of councils and later the bishop of Rome and other regional leaders in the east and in Egypt.

New Testament Prophecies of the Demise of Christ's Church

Matthew 13:24–30

In the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus describes the kingdom of God being filled with tares sown by his enemy, which are then allowed to grow until the harvest.

Matthew 24:5, 24

Jesus prophesies to his disciples that before his time comes, many false prophets and false Christs or messiahs will arise, deceiving many.

Acts 20:29–30

Luke records that Paul had called together the elders of the church in Ephesus to hear his farewell. He pled with them to take heed, for he knew that “grievous wolves” should come among them “not sparing the flock” (v. 29), and that even

some of the elders themselves would “arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (v. 30).

Romans 11:19–21

Paul warns the Roman saints that just as apostate Israel had been cut off, so would the Christians should they fail to “continue in goodness” (v. 22).

2 Thessalonians 2:3–4

Paul prophesies that Christ would not return before the “falling away” (v. 3)—the apostasy—and the son of perdition be exposed.

1 Timothy 4:1–3

Paul prophesies of future times when Christians will leave the faith and give “heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; . . . forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats.”

2 Timothy 3:1–9, 12; 4:3–4

Paul speaks of a coming “perilous” (3:1) time when men, apparently affiliated with the church, will be wicked in so many ways, loving pleasures more than God. These “traitors” (3:4) will have “a form of godliness” (3:5), but they will deny the power that makes godliness possible in men. All that will live godly lives in Christ will suffer persecution (3:12). Apparently speaking again of these same traitors, Paul prophesies that in that future time, “they will not endure sound doctrine” (4:3), but will “turn away” (4:4) from the truth unto fables. And they will find teachers who will justify the indulgence of their lusts.

2 Peter 2:1–3

Peter prophesies not only that false teachers will come among the Christians, but also that many will follow “their pernicious ways” (v. 2).

Revelation 13:7

John is shown in his vision that the beast will “make war with the saints, and . . . overcome them.”

**Evidences of First-Century Apostasy
from the New Testament**

John 6:66

Many of Jesus’s disciples left him because of his teachings.

Romans 1:8–32

Paul congratulates the Roman faithful and contrasts their case with that of those Christians “who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (v. 18), but who by their sins of idolatry, murder, homosexuality, and fornication have changed the truth of God into a lie and will receive severe judgment.

Romans 2:17–24

Paul confutes the Judaizers in the church who exalt themselves as circumcised Jews and defenders of the law, while they hypocritically commit all kinds of grievous sin and blaspheme the name of God among the Gentiles by their bad examples.

Romans 16:17–18

Paul recognizes that there are already some Roman Christians who “cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine” (v. 17). These appear to be smooth speakers who deceive the simple believers with their “good words and fair speeches”

(v. 18), but not in the service of Christ, but rather to make a living for themselves.

1 Corinthians 1:11–12; 3:4

Paul describes the splintering of churches as church members begin to proclaim allegiance to different leaders, such as Apollos and Paul, rather than Christ.

1 Corinthians 4:18

Pride in the church at Corinth causes some to reject the words of the apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 5:1, 6

Fornication and incest are named as sins committed by, or perhaps between, church members.

1 Corinthians 10:14

Some Corinthian saints begin to engage in idolatry.

1 Corinthians 11:18–22, 29–30, 34

There are divisions and heresies among the Christians at Corinth.

The Corinthians desecrate the sacrament by substituting for it pagan feasts.

Because they take the sacrament unworthily, they eat and drink damnation to themselves, and many have been made weak and sickly or have even died for it.

There are also other offenses which Paul hopes to straighten out when he comes.

1 Corinthians 14:1–37

There is confusion in the Corinthian church. Many are claiming to prophesy and to speak in tongues by inspiration. And the women, who should be silent, have joined in the fray.

Paul pleads for good order and peace, which would be an indication that they were guided by God's inspiration.

2 Corinthians 3:1; 7:2

Members begin to reject legitimate authority, and Paul's credentials appear to be questioned.

2 Corinthians 6:14–17

Paul pleads with the Corinthians to separate themselves from the heathens with whom they seem to be joined in their lives. Specifically they appear to be participating in idol worship at heathen temples

2 Corinthians 11:3–4, 12–15.

Paul argues to the Corinthian church that they should follow him rather than those who come preaching another Jesus, or another spirit or gospel. Paul recognizes his own weaknesses, but these others "are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (v. 13). But if Satan himself can be "transformed into an angel of light" (v. 14), it is not to be unexpected that his ministers should "be transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (v. 15).

Galatians 1:6–9; 3:1

Local leaders and false teachers are changing the gospel of Christ and are preaching "another gospel" (v. 6) as the truth. Paul marvels that the Christians there are "so soon removed from him" (v. 6) to these teachers of other gospels, and he curses all who are preaching their own gospels.

Galatians 4:8–11; 5:7, 15–22

Paul bemoans the retrogression of the church membership for their disobedience, their backbiting among church members, and their observation of pagan and Jewish holidays. He calls on

them to stand fast in their Christian liberty gained through the atonement of Christ and not to let themselves get entangled again with the works of the flesh—“adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like” (5:21)—of which he has warned them before. The sense is clearly that some significant part of the Galatian members have returned to their sinful ways.

Ephesians 4:1–5:21

Paul describes for the Christians in Ephesus the kinds of lives, the unity, and spiritual consistency that they can enjoy, if they would live according to “the vocation wherewith [they] are called” (4:1). If they will heed his call, they can come to a “unity of the faith . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . [and] be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (4:13–14). In the process he names a long list of sinful acts which are preventing them from leaving the world of the Gentiles and establishing a community of perfected saints. Paul calls them to stop walking “as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind” (4:17), with their “understanding darkened being alienated from God . . . because of the blindness of their heart” (4:18). As converts to Christ they are taught to put off works of greediness and lasciviousness. They must put away lying, anger, stealing, bitterness, evil speaking. He pleads with them to become “followers of God . . . walk[ing] in love” (5:1–2) If they would do this and be proper saints, such sins as fornication, uncleanness, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk and jesting would never need to be named among them. But whatever the vain men among them might say, “no

whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ” (5:5–6). But all things which are shameful even to speak of, that are being done in secret, shall be “made manifest by the light” (5:13). Again he pleads with them that they be “not unwise . . . [and] drunk with wine” (5:17–18), but that they be filled with the Spirit.

Colossians 2:8–9, 18

Paul writes to the faithful brethren at Colosse and encourages them to stand fast in the gospel of Christ that he taught them and not to heed the beguiling men who seek to spoil them through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men.

2 Thessalonians 2:7–9

Paul calls upon the Christians of Thessaly to withstand the strong delusions and lying wonders of their times. If they can stand fast, they will obtain the love and glory of Christ.

2 Thessalonians 3:6

Paul further notes that the Thessalonians are supporting disorderly busybodies who do not accept Paul’s epistles. He calls on local believers to separate themselves from such, and not to support their leadership.

1 Timothy 1:3–4, 6–7, 19–20

Paul explains why he left Timothy at Ephesus to call upon those Christians who were teaching false doctrines, “fables and endless genealogies” (v. 4), which only raise questions without edifying. These teachings have caused some to swerve and turn aside “unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law” (vv. 6–7) but without understanding. While among his own disciples, Timothy has been faithful, Hymenaeus and Alexander

have blasphemed and “made shipwreck” (v. 19) of their faith, and Paul has delivered them to the buffetings of Satan.

1 Timothy 5:15

Paul advises Timothy about how to address growing domestic apostasies in the Church and acknowledges that through these problems, members have “already turned aside after Satan.”

1 Timothy 6:1–10

Paul instructs Timothy on how to distinguish in the church between faithful teachers of godliness and those who are seeking the praise and riches of this world. The teaching of the latter group is marked by envy, strife, and “perverse disputings” (v. 5) that are destitute of truth. Those who love money rather than godliness “fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts” (v. 9).

1 Timothy 6:20–21

Timothy is further warned to beware those Christians who profess the faith, but who are engaged in “profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so called” (v. 20).

2 Timothy 1:8–18; 2:16–18; 4:14–17

Paul writes Timothy to encourage him not to be ashamed of his testimony of Jesus or of his affiliation with Paul. He cites two prominent Christians by name as examples and complains “that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me” (1:15). He excepts “the house of Onesiphorus” of Ephesus who “refreshed” Paul and was “not ashamed of [Paul’s] chain” (1:16). Timothy is warned specifically to avoid “profane and vain babblings” (2:16); for they will increase unto more ungodliness, as in the cases of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who are teaching a

false understanding of the resurrection. Further, Paul recites the specific case of a coppersmith who did Paul “much evil,” for he “greatly withstood our words” (4:14–15). And no one of the congregation would stand with Paul against him.

Titus 1:10–14

Paul left Titus in Crete specifically “to set in order the things that are wanting” (v. 5). He is warned to be careful who he selects to be elders or bishops because “there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers . . . who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (vv. 10–11). Paul hopes that sharp rebukes may return them to soundness of faith, so that they will no longer give “heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth” (v. 14).

Titus 2:1–15

Paul exhorts Titus to set the church in order, as all age groups from both sexes need to be raised from inappropriate behavior, that Christ might “redeem [them] from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (v. 14).

Titus 3:9–11

Paul goes on to enumerate other failings of the members, which he seems to think can be corrected by Titus’s teaching. But he also recognizes the serious dangers of those who are focused on “foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law” (v. 9). If a man maintains his heretical position after being admonished a second time, Titus is to reject him as a sinner and subverter of others.

James 1–2

James recognizes that all are tempted and that the members of the church must not only speak the truth, but their lives

must reflect comparable good works. Otherwise their religion is vain. In addition to other sins, he emphasizes the practice of despising the poor and ignoring the teaching of Christ to love their neighbor. For until their works meet these expectations of Christ, their faith is dead.

James 4:1–8

James describes “wars and fightings” (v. 1) among the Christians which arise from their own lusts. Calling them adulterers and enemies to God, he urges them to be humble and resist the devil, that God may cleanse their hands and purify their double-minded hearts.

2 Peter 2:1–22; 3:16–18

Peter warns the members against those of their own number who engage in all kinds of sins, including “damnable heresies” (2:1), covetousness, walking “after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness” (2:10), evil speaking, “having eyes full of adultery” (2:14). These have all gone astray. For having once escaped the world “through the knowledge of the Lord” (2:20), and becoming again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. They exemplify the proverbs of the dog that is turned to his own vomit and the washed sow that returns to wallowing in the mire (2:22). After discussing false teachings by scoffers in the church, he warns the members again not to wrest the scriptures or to be led away by the errors of the wicked, but to remain steadfast and grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord (3:16–18).

1 John 2:9–27; 4:1

John warns the members that any who hate their brothers are in darkness. He warns them not to love the world, the lusts of the flesh or the pride of the eyes, as these things are “not of

the Father” (2:16). For “even now are there many antichrists” (2:18), that arose from within the church. But now they deny the Father and the Son. But the anointing which the members have received can protect them from these seducers. Further, because there are many false prophets, James teaches those who would be faithful how to distinguish the true from the false.

3 John 1:9–10

A prideful and apostate local leader, presumably an elder or a bishop, rejects apostolic authority and even excommunicates those who stand up for the apostles.

Jude 1:3–19

Jude writes to the faithful who he fears have been taken in by ungodly men who have crept in unawares, denying Christ and turning his grace into lasciviousness. Jude invokes Old Testament and other writings as examples and prophecies of this kind of thing and calls the ungodly among them “murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men’s persons in admiration because of advantage” (v. 16).

Revelation 2–3

John sees the Son of Man, who commands him to write to the seven churches. Ephesus has done many good things, is now fallen and must repent, having left the Lord (2:5–6). The church in Pergamos has held fast against Satan, but harbors proponents of the doctrine of Balaam that eat meat sacrificed to idols and commit fornication. There are also Christians there who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans—which the Lord hates (2:12–16). In spite of many good works, the church at Thyatira permits Jezebel to pass herself off as a prophetess while seducing the Lord’s servants to fornicate and to eat

things sacrificed unto idols (2:18–20). There appear to be only a few members in Sardis who “have not defiled their garments” and who are worthy to walk with the Lord (3:1–6). Laodiceans focused on wealth, are comfortable and do not recognize their need for the Lord’s aid. They are neither cold nor hot, and the Lord will spew them out (3:16–17).