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### Departure from “The Way”

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*Breaking of the covenant; changing of the ordinances.* In part we have already shown how men who had accepted the revelations of God—the Jew and the Christian—left the Christ as the revelation of God, and went after the vain philosophies of the Greek and Roman and the Egyptian Gentiles, denying even the Lord that bought them. Now that a surer knowledge is given of the whole Christian plan of things, it becomes necessary to point out how there was a departure, not only from a true conception of God, from the right idea of creation, from the knowledge of the origin of man, and right apprehension of the purpose of God in the earth life of man—but they have departed from the Way of life as revealed in and through the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ. Things became, as Isaiah predicted they would, viz., that it would be the same with master and servant, the buyer and seller, the priest and the people (cf. Isa. 24:2); the earth would mourn and fade away as to spiritual knowledge and spiritual power, until the earth itself would become

defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance(s), broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left. (Isa. 24:4-6)<sup>a</sup>

It should be observed that this prophecy of the great Isaiah could have no reference to the law of Moses that had been given to Israel. It is an “everlasting covenant” that the prophet refers to as being broken and the ordinances thereof changed. The blood of the Christ is spoken of as “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20). Hence it is the “covenant” sealed by the blood of the Christ that men would break. It is the ordinances of the “everlasting covenant”—or the “everlasting gospel,” that they would change; and this the Christians, even in apostolic times, began to do.

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<sup>a</sup>In Hebrew, the word for “ordinance” is singular.

*Disagreement among the leading officers of the primitive church.* It is a mistake to suppose that the primitive *Christian* church was removed from such a possibility as this by reason of any sanctity that obtained in its membership. On the contrary, they supplied the elements for such a departure from the faith of the “everlasting covenant” predicted by Isaiah. Even the apostles were early engaged in controversies. The question which arose as to the relationship of the gospel to the Jews, who regarded themselves [as] still under obligations to keep the law of Moses, received authoritative and amicable settlement to the effect that observance of the law of Moses should not be required of the new converts from among the Gentiles, and such was the drawing together under the spirit of that council’s decision that St. Peter went down to Antioch and at first mingled unreservedly with both gentile and Jewish converts without distinction; but when certain ones came down from James, who resided at Jerusalem, then Peter suddenly withdrew his social fellowship from the gentile converts; other Jewish brethren did the same, Barnabas, a friend of Paul was among the number. Whereupon Paul withstood Peter to the face directly charging him before all the brethren with “dissimulation;” saying, “If thou, *being* a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews” (Gal. 2:14). Yet this same Paul, notwithstanding his loyalty to the gentile converts on that occasion, his zeal for the decision which had been rendered by the council at the church at Jerusalem, and notwithstanding his usually strong moral courage, subsequently showed by his conduct that he, too, was not beyond the weakness of “becoming all things to all men”; for a short time after the incident with Peter at Antioch, when in the Province of Galatia, and desiring Timothy to be his companion in the ministry, Paul took him and circumcised him; for it was well known that while his mother was a Jewess his father was a Greek; and all this for fear of the Jews (Acts 16:1-4).

*Law and gospel controversy.* This question continued to be a cause of contention even after this sharp disputation at Antioch, for though the discussion of the council at Jerusalem was against the contention of the Judaizing party, yet they continued to agitate the question, and in Galatia, at least, succeeded in turning the saints of that province from “the grace of Christ unto another gospel . . . perverting the gospel of Christ” (cf. Gal. 1:6-7). This question in fact continued to agitate the church throughout the apostolic age and was finally settled through overwhelming numbers of Gentiles being converted and taking possession of the church, rather than from any respect for the decision of the council at Jerusalem.

The withdrawal of John Mark from the ministry while accompanying Paul and Barnabas on their first mission in Asia Minor, and which withdrawal grew out of a faltering of his zeal or a misunderstanding with his companions,<sup>†</sup> will be well remembered (Acts 13:13). Subsequently when Paul proposed to Barnabas that they go again and “visit the brethren in every city where they had preached” (cf. Acts 15:36 [36-39]), while on their first mission, a sharp contention arose between them about this same John Mark. Barnabas desired to take him again into the ministry, but Paul seriously objected; and so pronounced was the quarrel between them that these two friends and fellow yokemen in the ministry parted company. It is just possible also that in addition to this misunderstanding about John Mark, the severe reproof which Paul administered to Barnabas in the affair of dissimulation at Antioch had somehow strained their friendship.

*Status Character of church membership in apostolic times.* Turning from these misunderstandings and criminations among the leading officers of the church, let us inquire how it stood with the members. The epistles of Paul to the church at Corinth disclose the fact that there were serious schisms among them; some boasting that they were of Paul, others that they were of Apollos, others of Cephas, and still others of Christ; which led Paul to ask sharply, “Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you?” (1 Cor. 1:13). There were endless strifes as well as divisions among them, which caused Paul to denounce them as “carnally minded” (cf. 1 Cor. 3:3-4). Among them also was such fornication as was not named among the Gentiles, “that one should have his father’s wife”! (1 Cor. 5:1). And this shameful sin had not humbled the church at Corinth, for Paul denounced them for being puffed up in the presence of such a crime, rather than having mourned over it (1 Cor. 5:1-3). They were in the habit of going to law one with another, and that before the world, in violation of the teachings of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:1-20). They desecrated the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper by their drunkenness, for which they were sharply reprovved by the apostle. They ate and drank unworthily, “not discerning the Lord’s body;” for which cause many were sickly among them, and many slept (that is, died) (1 Cor. 11:20-22, 29-30). There were heresies also among them (1 Cor. 11:18-19), some denying the resurrection of the dead, while others possessed not the knowledge of

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<sup>†</sup>The committee of the Quorum of the Twelve cautioned: “The cause of John Mark leaving the ministry, questioned.” Reporting to President Clawson on October 10, 1929, George Albert Smith added: “This statement also, is not necessary to the argument.”

God, which the Apostle declared was *to* their shame (1 Cor. 15:12-34). It is true, this sharp letter of reproof made the Corinthian saints sorry, and sorry, too, after a godly fashion, in that it brought them to a partial repentance; but even in the second epistle, from which we learn of their partial repentance, the apostle could still charge that there were many in the church who had not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they had committed (2 Cor. 12:21). From this second letter, also, we learn that there were many in the church at large who corrupted the word of God (2 Cor. 2:17); that there were those, even in the ministry, who were “false prophets, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:12-14).

Of the churches throughout the province of Galatia it is scarcely necessary to say more than we have already said concerning the invasion of that province by Judaizing Christian ministers who were turning away the saints from the grace of Christ back to the beggarly elements of the law of carnal commandments; a circumstance which led Paul to exclaim: “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that *<had>* called you *<unto>* [into] the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7).

*Two parties in the church of the first century.* That there were two distinct parties in the church at this time (Apostolic age) between whom bitter contentions arose, from thirty A.D. to the close of the first Christian century, is further evidenced by the letter of Paul to the Philippians. Some preached Christ even of envy and strife, and some of good will. “The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely,” says Paul, “supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel” (Philip. 1:15-17). “Beware of dogs,” said he again to the same people, “beware of evil workers, beware of the concision” (Philip. 3:2). “Brethren, be followers . . . of me,” he admonished them,

and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is [in] their shame, who mind earthly things.) (Philip. 3:17-19)

To the Colossians, Paul found it necessary to say:

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. . . . Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility

and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind. (Col. 2:8, 18)

*Evidence of early dissensions among primitive Christians.* But it is in Paul's pastoral letters that we get a deeper insight into the corruptions threatening the early church, and even beginning to lay the foundation for the subsequent apostasy which overwhelmed it. The apostle sent Timothy to the saints at Ephesus to represent him, that he might charge some to teach no other doctrines than those which he had delivered to them; "neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith," for some had turned aside from the commandment of charity, out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and faith unfeigned, unto "*<vile>* [vain] jangling, desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" (cf. 1 Tim. 1:3-7). Others concerning faith had made shipwreck, of whom were Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom Paul had delivered unto Satan that they might learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:19-20). Others had "erred concerning the faith" and had "given heed to babbling, and opposition of science falsely so called" (cf. 1 Tim. 6:20). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul informs him that all the saints in Asia had turned away from him, of whom were Phygellus and Hermogenes (2 Tim. 1:15). He admonished Timothy again to shun "profane and vain babblings: for," said he, "they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:16-18). Demas, once a fellow laborer with Paul, had forsaken him, "having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). At Paul's first answer, that is, when arraigned before the court at Rome, no man stood with him, but all men forsook him; he prays that God will not lay this to their charge (2 Tim. 4:16). Paul admonished Titus to hold fast to the faith, for there were many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; who subverted whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake; and were giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men and turning from the truth (Titus 1:9-14).

*St. Peter's prophecies on apostasy.* Peter also had something to say with reference to the danger of heresies and false teachers which menaced the church. He declared that there would be false teachers

among the saints, “who privily . . . 〈would〉 bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many,” said he,

shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the *way of* truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now 〈for〉 [of] a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. For . . . God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment. (2 Pet. 2:1-4)

He argued that the Lord would not spare these corrupters of the gospel of Christ, who, like the dog had turned again to his own vomit, and the sow who was washed to her wallowing in the mire (2 Pet. 2:1-22). He charged also that some were wresting the epistles of Paul, as they were some of the “other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

*Testimony of St. John on apostasy.* John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, also bears testimony to the existence of anti-Christ, false prophets, and the depravity of many in the early church. “It is the last time,” said he, “and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us . . . that they might be [made] manifest that they were not all of us” (1 Jn. 2:18-19). “Try the spirits,” said he, in the same epistle, “whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1). Again: “Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver [and] an antichrist” (2 Jn. 1:7).

Jude also is a witness against this class of deceivers. He admonished the saints to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For,” said he, “there are certain men crept in unawares, . . . ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:3-4). The rest of the epistle he devotes to a description of their wickedness, comparing it with the conduct of Satan, and the vileness of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

*Purpose of this review.* We have given this review of the condition of the church of Christ in the apostolic age not with the intention of establishing the idea that the church at that time was in a complete state of apostasy; nor have we dwelt upon the weaknesses and sins of the early saints for the purpose of holding them up for contempt. Our only purpose has been to dispel, first of all, the extravagant ideas that obtain in many minds concerning the absolute sanctity of the early Christians; and secondly, and mainly, to show that there were elements

and tendencies existing in the early church, even in the days of the apostles, that would, when unrestrained by apostolic authority and power, lead to its entire overthrow.

We have no good reason to believe that there occurred any change for the better in the affairs of the church after the demise of the apostles, no reason to believe that there were fewer heresies or fewer false teachers, or false prophets to lead away the people with their vain philosophies, their foolish babblings, and opposition of science falsely so called. On the contrary, one is forced to believe the prediction of Paul, viz., that “evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). For who, after the apostles were fallen asleep, would stand up and correct the heresies that were brought in to the church, rebuke the schismatics, the false teachers and false prophets that arose to draw away disciples after them? If false teachers insinuated themselves into the church, brought in damnable heresies “by reason of *<which>* [whom] the way of truth was evil spoken of” (cf. 2 Pet. 2:2), and the pure religion of Jesus Christ corrupted even while inspired apostles were still in the church, it is not unreasonable to conclude that all these evils would increase and revel unchecked after the death of the apostles.

*The effect of early persecutions on the church.* Running parallel with this rise of false teachers and multiplication of heresies was running the effects of persecution of the church during the first three centuries of its existence. Let no one attempt to minimize that effect of successive persecutions upon the Christians.<sup>b</sup> True they endured much and many died faithful in their devotions to what they regarded as the true religion of Jesus Christ, but heretics as well as true Christians suffered in these persecutions and some of the heretics with equal heroism to those who were true martyrs to the Christian faith. Suffering martyrdom in a cause does not always mean that the cause itself is true; a fact of which the history of all persecutions abundantly attests. Meantime, the effect of these early persecutions of the Christians by the Jews, and later by the Roman emperors, had the result of breaking down the faith and constancy of many, until it can be truly said that the saints were worn out (cf. **Daniel 7:25**), or so nearly so that only weak and timorous men were left to ineffectually resist the paganization of Christianity and the destruction of the real church of Christ. That the

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<sup>b</sup>For a general survey of early Christian history, see William H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); on early persecutions, see William H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964). See also *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 2:671–74.



Roman emperors considered the destruction of the Christian **church** completed by the Diocletian persecution (beginning 303 A.D. and lasting through ten years) is witnessed by the inscriptions upon monuments and medals. Two pillars in Spain erected to commemorate the reign of Diocletian bore the following inscriptions:

Dioclesian, Jovian, Maximian Herculeus, Caesares Augusti, for having extended the Roman empire in the East and West, and for having extinguished the name of Christians, who brought the Republic to ruin. . . .

Dioclesian, etc., for having adopted Galerius in the East, for having everywhere abolished the superstition of Christ, for having extended the worship of the gods.

And on the medal of Diocletian this: “The name of Christians being extinguished.”<sup>1</sup>

We know it will be said that this supposed triumph over Christianity announced on these monuments was almost immediately followed by the triumph of Christianity under Constantine, called “the Great,” and then the Christian religion became practically the state religion of the empire; but was it the Christian religion that thus triumphed, or a merely paganized form of religion bearing that name? We are sure that prophetic history and the truth of history will sustain the view that the Christianity of the early decades of the fourth century and through all the centuries following the fourth was no longer the gospel of Jesus Christ; nor the churches that survived—Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and the Protestant sections of Christendom, with all its subdivisions, were not, and are not the church of Jesus Christ. A sweeping declaration we know, but an extensive inquiry into the subject, running through many years of study and writing upon that branch of history, has led to the conclusion so positively drawn,<sup>2</sup> namely: that there was a universal turning away or apostasy from the religion of Jesus Christ as established in the dispensation of the meridian of times. It has also been noted in this writing that a dispensation posterier to the meridian dispensation—“The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times” would follow the age of the Christ and his apostles (Eph. 1:10).

<sup>1</sup>See Milner, *Church History* 2:6-7.

<sup>2</sup>See the writer’s account of the “Apostasy” from the gospel, and also the “Destruction of the Christian Church” in his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (1893), that is ~~now (1924)~~ in its fourth edition (1924); also his introduction to Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 1. Also a treatise on the same theme in his *New Witnesses for God*, 1:45-136. [Another draft of this footnote was appended to the end of this chapter 46.]

*Paul's great prophecy on universal apostasy.* We shall only pause here to introduce one great testimony concerning this **universal** apostasy which, however, while brief, is complete and conclusive on the subject. It is found in the second epistle of Paul to the Thesalonians and consists of a prophecy which, if the apostasy of so-called Christendom has not been complete and universal, proves beyond all question that the great apostle of the Gentiles was a false prophet. On the other hand if fulfilled, then it proves that the church of Christ, so far as its existence in the earth is concerned, was to be destroyed; that another church, one founded by men, was to usurp the place of the church of Christ; a worldly church, dominated by the very spirit of Lucifer, who, under its rule, would oppose and exalt himself above all that is called God; and sit in the temple of God; showing himself—so far as this world is concerned—that he is God. Moreover Paul declared in this very prophecy we are about to quote, that the forces which would ultimately bring to pass this universal apostasy from the Christian religion—"the mystery of iniquity"—was already at work even in his day. With this introduction, which is also to be considered as our comment upon, and interpretation of the prophecy, we quote Paul's great prediction on the universal apostasy from the true Christian religion:

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth *<hindereth>* will let *<hinder>*, until he be taken out of the way. *<i.e. the true servants of God, the apostles of the Church—the true priesthood of God resisting the encroachments of the evil power—until they should be taken out of its way by persecution and death.>* And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thes. 2:1-12)

If prophecy be regarded as history reversed, then here is an important historical as well as prophetic document, all which tends to prove what is contended for in this chapter.

*The sum of the matter contended for:* The sum of the matter stands thus: When the appointed time was come, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, came and made the appointed atonement for the transgression of Adam and the sins of the world, and brought men under the dominion of love and its consequent, his mercy. He taught the gospel; he brought life and immortality to light; he brought into existence a church, and then ascended on high to his Father.

For a time the gospel in its simplicity was preached in the world by the chosen apostles, though even in their day men began to mar it with their vain philosophies, their doctrines of science falsely so-called; and when the apostles passed away in death—then corruptions ran riot in the church; doctrines of men were taught for the commandments of God; a church made by men was substituted for the church of Christ; a church full of pride and worldliness; a church, which, while it clung to the forms of godliness, ran riot in excesses and abominations—until spiritual darkness fell like a pall over the nations; and thus they lay for ages—called the “Dark Ages.”

In vain men sought to bring about “Reformations,” and through them bring back the religion of Jesus Christ, and the church of Christ. To do that, however, was beyond the power of these men, however good their intentions. The gospel taken from the earth, divine authority lost, the church of Christ destroyed, there was but one way in which all this could be restored, namely: by reopening the heavens and dispensing again a knowledge of the gospel; by once more conferring divine authority upon men, together with a commission to teach all the world, and reestablish the church of Christ on earth. In a word, to bring in the promised “Dispensation of the Fulness of Times,” which shall unite into one all former dispensations and “gather together in one all things in Christ, . . . even in him” (Eph. 1:10).

~~The account of bringing in such a dispensation is to be the subject of our next chapter.~~

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Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Hopkins, *The End of Controversy Controverted*, esp. vol. 1, ch. 5; Milman, *History of Christianity from the Birth of Christ*; Milner, *End of Religious Controversy*; Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, chs. on “Adverse Events” and “Schisms and Heresies”; Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*; Priestly, *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (“a most scholarly and masterful treatise”); Talmage, *Great Apostasy*.