

Sunday, October 31, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 7 Early Church History: Local Churches Enter Apostasy

### **Inspired History**

- Luke 1:1-3—the Holy Spirit through the pen of Luke, under inspiration, writes an orderly chronological account of the commonly held beliefs regarding the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.
- Acts 1:1—the book of Acts is part two of Luke’s historical account addressed to Theophilus.
- See Handout on *The Incredible Accuracy of Luke*
- Taken together the books of Luke and Acts present their readers the Holy Spirit’s inspired history from the announcement of Christ’s birth to Mary through Paul’s imprisonment in Acts 28.
- During this time the majority of Paul’s epistles were written. See handout by David W. Reid
- The Holy Spirit’s inspired history was written by one of Paul’s travel companions.
  - Acts 16:10-13, 16, 28, 20:6, 13-15, 21:1-10, 17, 27:1-7, 27, 28:10-16
  - Acts 13:2-6, 13-14, 17, 27-29, 14:1
- So the God authorized history of early church history was written by a travel companion and friend of the Apostle Paul.
- All of this is significant because every church historian will tell you that the first 100 years of church history after the close of the book of Acts beginning about 70 AD and lasting till about 150 AD is shrouded in darkness and uncertainty.
- R. Dawson Barlow, author of *The Apostasy of the Christian Church*, quotes the following authors when making this point:
  - Des Griffen, author of *The Fourth Reich of the Rich*, states, “The Acts of the Apostles is the true history of the Christian church up to the year 69 AD. . . what happened immediately after that date is know as the “lost century” or the “age of shadows.” (quoted in Barlow, 72)
  - Jesse Hurlbut, author of *The Story of the Christian Church*, writes, “. . . of all the periods in the church’s history, it (i.e., the first century after Paul’s death) is the one about which we know the least. . . for fifty years after St. Paul’s life, a curtain hangs over the History of the Christian Church through with we strive vainly to look, and when at last it rises, about 120 AD, whtih the writings of the church fathers, we find a church, in many aspects different from that in the days of . . . St. Paul.” (quoted in Barlow, 72-73)

- Mark A. Noll, author of *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, offers the following analysis of the historical evidence that exists immediately following the close of the New Testament:

“Two large difficulties stand in the way of interpreting the nature of this early history. First is the fact that hard evidence for a half-century or so from the end of the New Testament era is scarce. Historians and theologians are thus required to fill in with imagination, speculation, or informed hunches what went on between the era illuminated by the New Testament and the period from about 110, when the flow of evidence, though at first only a trickle, begins again.

The second difficulty is that the hard evidence that does exist from early subapostolic history is simply not definite or full enough to answer many of the legitimate questions we are eager to ask about this early Christian era.” (Noll, 31-32)

### **Early Apostasy**

- While I do not dispute that there is an absence of extra Biblical historical information for the time period immediately following the close of the book of Acts that does not mean Bible believing church historians are in the dark about the post-Pauline era.
- Paul’s liberty epistles (I Timothy and Titus) written after Acts 28 as well as his second imprisonment epistle of II Timothy offer great insight into the history of the church at the end Paul’s life as well as after his death.
- I Timothy 4:1—“some shall depart from the faith”
- II Timothy 1:15—“all they which are in Asia be turned away from me”
- Acts 19:10—Paul spent at least two years in Asia establishing churches.
- I Corinthians 16:19—what these verses teach is that people were already departing from the unique message and ministry of the Apostle Paul while he was still alive.
- Acts 20:31—this apostasy would have included the church at Ephesus at which Paul spent three years.
- Therefore I believe that II Timothy sheds light on this so-called dark era of church history. What was happening during this period was nothing short of full scale and wide spread apostasy. This explains why when the streams of historical evidence begin flowing again, the church found described therein is so vastly different from the nature and character of the churches Paul established and addressed during his ministry.
- Just as Israel entered into apostasy by failing to listen to God’s spokes men Moses so has it been for the body of Christ.
- Once the distinctive message and ministry of Paul was lost it was only a matter of time before other important Pauline truths were also lost.

- For the Bible believing church historian it would be easy to conclude that the loss of Pauline truth contributed in a major way to the onset of the Dark Ages.
- It is suggested by the chart below that these truths were lost in a particular order and then recovered in reverse order.

### **Pauline Truths Lost (Order of Loss)**

- *First*—The Distinctive Message and Ministry of the Apostle Paul
- *Second*—The Pre-Tribulational Rapture of the Church the Body of Christ
- *Third*—The Difference Between Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ
- *Fourth*—Justification by Grace Through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone

### **Pauline Truths Recovered (Order of Recovery)**

- *First*—Justification by Grace Through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone. Recovered via the Protestant Revolution in the 16<sup>th</sup> century via Luther and others.
- *Second*—The Difference Between Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ Recovered in the 1800's via John Nelson Darby, E.W. Bullinger, Sir Robert Anderson and others.
- *Third*—The Pre-Tribulational Rapture of the Church, the Body of Christ Recovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century via John Nelson Darby and included and popularized by C.I. Scofield in his Reference Bible in 1909.
- *Fourth*—The Distinctive Message and Ministry of the Apostle Paul Recovered from the middle of the 1900's via J.C. O'Hair, Charles F. Baker, Cornelius R. Stam and others. (Lewis, 1)
- "During the entire process of loss and recovery of these truths, we saw the formation of most all of the 400 denominations that can be observed today." (Lewis, 1)

### **Insights Into Apostasy From II Timothy**

- When considering the book of II Timothy the careful student will note that there are two characters in each chapter who illustrate various themes of apostasy. When one considers the meanings of these names it will yield instructive information regarding the nature of apostasy. (Barlow, 73)
- II Timothy 1:15—tells us that Phygellus and Hermogenes along with the rest of Asia "turned away" from Paul.
  - Matthew 26:52—the phrase "put up again" comes from the same Greek word translated "turned away from me" in II Timothy 1:15.
  - II Timothy 4:3-4—"Paul experienced the heartache of seeing those who once professed faith in the message of Grace, turn away from the gospel and revert to the legalism that was demanded of the kingdom message." (Barlow, 77).
  - *Phygellus*—means fugitive
  - *Hermogenes*—means born of Mercury or Hermes which means he was named after the pagan God of war.

- All those who turn away from the Gospel of Grace will forever be fugitives from the God of the Bible and sooner or later they will declare war on God's truth by embracing human viewpoint and godless philosophy. (adapted from Barlow, 78)
- II Timothy 2:18—tells us that Hymenaeus and Philetus “have erred” concerning the truth. The phrase “have erred” is translated from the Greek word “*astocheo*,” meaning to “miss the mark’ or to “deviate from truth.”
  - I Timothy 1:5-7, 6:20-21
  - *Hymenaeus*—means loving
  - *Philetus*—means amiable
  - The meanings of these names are illustrative of the way most apostates operate. Few apostates scream obscenities and vulgarisms which offend the sensitivities and refined natures of most civilized people. Rather they often take up a worthy “social” cause, and expend their abilities and talents and lead others astray in the name of love. Such people denounce the teaching of Bible doctrines and emphasize the need for us to be more “loving” and “amiable” in our demeanor. (Barlow, 80-81)
- II Timothy 3:8—tells us that Jannes and Jambrees resisted the truth.
  - James 4:7, Galatians 2:11
  - *Jannes*—means he who seduces
  - *Jambres*—means soothsayer or mystic
  - The names of these men offer both rare insight and vivid commentary on the nature of apostasy. All apostasy constitutes a seduction from God's objective standard which replaced with some mystical subjective philosophy that masquerades as some new truth. This new truth causes those who embrace it to become militant in their defense of it. This illustrates the progressive nature of apostasy. It starts out by turning away, then having erred from the truth; it grows into a resistance against the truth. (Barlow, 81)
- II Timothy 4:10—Demas forsook Paul with Alexander the Coppersmith did him much evil and withstood his words (4:14-15)
  - Matthew 27:46—God the father forsakes God the son
  - Hebrews 13:5—God the father forsook God the son so that we might never be forsaken.
  - *Demas*—means popular
  - *Alexander*—means helper of man

- Demas forsook Paul he would rather be popular through love of the world than to stand for the truth. Alexander withstood Paul by getting involved with teaching and doctrines there were designed to help his fellow man (social gospel).

### **Final Thoughts on Apostasy**

- Before Paul was even dead a great turning from the truth was already well under way. This is important to bear in mind when we beginning to consider the era of the Church Fathers next week. The writings of the Church Fathers bring the Church historian out of the darkness of the post-Acts period in terms of historical evidence. However, the writings of the Fathers demonstrate how pervasive the apostasy was within 100 years of the death of Paul.
- Apostasy is rarely manifested or perceived as ugly or insidiously evil. Rather it appears like, in the inspired words of Paul, “an angel of light,” II Corinthians 11:14. The original turning away, is not a turning away from God, as such, but from the messenger of God for this present dispensation. (Barlow, 83)
- As a result, church history is the heartbreaking tale of supplementing God’s word with a vast array of pagan ceremonies, ritual, tradition, celebrations, and religious practices that are not only not in the Bible, but are actually contrary to the Bible. (Barlow 83-84)
- “Between the religion of Christendom and the revelation upon which it claims to be founded there yaws a gulf which is impassable.” (Sir Robert Anderson, quoted in Barlow, 84)

### **Works Cited**

Barlow, R. Dawson. *The Apostasy of the Christian Church*. Erie, PA: Seedsower Publications, 2005.

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