

# **RESTORING: NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY AS IT RELATES TO CHURCH HISTORY**

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## **Introduction**

A study of the history of the Lord's church is an important one from two respects: first, so that one may be assured that the Lord's church is an historical institution; and, second, so that one may appreciate the fact that the Lord's church is not history! The theme of this lectureship emphasizes both of these facts, and it is a great honor for this writer to be able to have a small part in developing this thought specifically with regard to the subject at hand, "New Testament Christianity as it Relates to Church History." The writer is grateful to the congregation at Forest Hill and her elders and to the director of the Memphis School of Preaching and the school's lectureship committee for the opportunity to contribute to this needful study.

As ones who are the beneficiaries of what is termed the Restoration Movement or Restoration plea--the simple plea to return to Scripture alone as sole authority for salvation and church order and organization--Christians today should be cognizant of the course of Christianity over the past two millennia; accordingly, the aim of Christians ought always to be what the people of God generally, and the church particularly, have consistently been when at their best (e.g., [Eph 4:11-16](#)) and to forsake the characteristics and doctrines which have marked God's children when they have fallen short of the Divine ideal--especially in the early years when the church began to drift from her God and move toward what would become thousands of religious groups. The story of the early church is one of successes and failures (typically in that order), and of persecutions and other obstacles (both from without and within); so, in this lesson, the writer will examine what made the early church special, why the early church digressed so quickly,

how the early church digressed so quickly, and what lessons there are in these things for the church today.

### **What Made the Early Church Special**

The early church thrived because she was what God intended her to be; she had her origination with God and not men. She, "plain" but immaculate "had a simple creed: One God, one Father of all; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Spirit, one hope, one body, one name, one people, one purpose [see Eph. 4:4-6-DFC] . . . the literal word of God, fairly translated, without note or comment, exposition or coloring" (Fanning 246). Her members, who had been added to the church upon meeting the inspired prerequisite (Acts 2:38, 47), knew that the cause was the Lord's--not theirs--and that they were each to work as "lively stones" (1 Pet. 2:5) to do His Will as His people (ibid). They knew it and they did it!

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:41-47).

Some of the disciples were soon after imprisoned (Acts 4:3), "Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand" (Acts 4:4).

The early church saw sin graphically punished (Acts 5:1-10),

And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest durst no man join

himself to them: but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.) (Acts 5:11-14).

The disciples were accosted again, with accusers

Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. ... And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, ... And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 5:28, 41-42; 6:1, 7).

Saul of Tarsus, one of the worst of the persecutors of the early church was added to her number (Acts 9:17-22), "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" (Acts 9:31).

The Gospel travelled beyond the borders of Palestine, "And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord" (Acts 11:21). There was political corruption and despotism (as punished in Acts 12:21-23), "But the word of God grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:24). "So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed" (Acts 19:20) throughout the first century and throughout the Roman Empire, "verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18)! Paul could speak to the Colossians of the truth of the Gospel (Col. 1:5) "Which is come unto you, as *it is* in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as *it doth* also in you, since the day ye heard *of it*, and knew the grace of God in truth:" (Col. 1:6); he could say similar to the Thessalonians, "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have *free* course, and be glorified, even as *it is* with you:" (2 The. 3:1).

The prophecies had proven true! David had written, "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee" (Psa. 22:27). Isaiah had prophesied,

And it shall come to pass in the last days, *that* the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3).

### **How the Early Church Digressed So Quickly**

As prophecy had foretold what proved to be a flourishing beginning for the Lord's church, prophecies also warned about early threats to the church. Paul warned the Ephesians, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves [the Ephesian elders-DFC (Acts 20:17)] shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). He warned the Corinthians of a particular type of threat, saying,

For such [as would beguile the Corinthians-DFC {2 Cor. 11:3-4}] *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works (2 Cor. 11:13-15; c.f., 2:17, "For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ").

To the Thessalonians, he was even more pointed and foreboding regarding a particular future threat to the church:

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 *will let*, until he be taken out of the way. 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 The. 2:1-12).

Sadly, the inevitable future was closer for some than others; he lamented to the Galatians, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you 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). The threat also was being realized in Rome, to whom Paul wrote, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple" (Rom. 16:17-18).

By the end of the first century, the Lord Himself would write,

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; ... Nevertheless I have *somewhat* against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. ... And unto the angel of the church in Pergamos write; ... I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ... And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; ... I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a

prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. ... And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; ... I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. ... Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. ... And unto the angel of the church in Laodiceans write; ... I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. ... thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: ... repent (Rev. 2:1, 4-5, 12, 14-16, 18, 20; 3:1, 3, 14-17, 19).

David Lipscomb recognized how serious the problem was; the apostasy was not superficial or minor--it was exactly as Scripture said it would be: tragic, horrible, certain. He wrote,

The apostasy of the churches has been more significantly set forth in the Scriptures than we give credit for. ... The churches [especially the seven of Asia] as left here [presumably after the apostles had left for other fields or ultimately died-DFC] were liable to be entered by bad men, taught evil ways, perverted and made synagogues of Satan, casting out the apostles and inspired teachers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to become perverters of the churches they claim to teach and preserve. The management of these churches was given to man for him to carry out under the laws of God. Man perverts them by refusing to obey these laws and by substituting the rules and laws of man for those of God. There are two ways of rejecting these laws of God. First, by going beyond and adding other laws; second, by restricting the laws of God and restraining man in his work within limits and from purposes permitted by God" (Lipscomb, "Apostasy of Churches," 1209).

Why was there such a swift decline? Perhaps because the Lord gave the responsibility of propagating and protecting the early church to men--the earthen vessels of 2 Corinthians 4:7.

Men are imperfect, and the more that men governed themselves--both in time and measure--the further they got from God. The early church was doomed if men ignored the simple Doctrine upon which the church had been founded and had flourished! Quickly, men demonstrated that they were men; David Lipscomb who was shown to have acknowledged this in the prior quote also wrote regarding the disparity between the ideal and the real,

There is no doubt in my mind but that the ideal church of the New Testament is one in which all the members and workers in the church grow up in the church and are the outgrowth of the life and work of the church. ... the end of the teaching [of the church as exemplified in [Eph. 4:11-16-DFC](#)] should be a self-edifying, self-working, and aggressive body, reaching out, doing good, and spreading the truth to all around. ... None of the churches come up to the ideal, perhaps will not while man is in his present mortal state ("The Churches of the Scriptures," 185).

A few years later, effectively building upon this thought, Lipscomb would write further,

Degeneracy and decay mark the course of all institutions run by men. It is so with the churches of God. They were formed by God. The laws given to regulate them were given by God; and if these laws were perfectly lived up to, these churches would show no decay, but would live perennially, with a continually increasing vigor and strength. But poor, weak, uncertain men must study, understand, and apply that law. In doing these things the weakness and mistakes of humanity creep in and the blunders and degeneracy of the churches grow in them. In every family mentioned in the Bible, the family as a whole degenerated before the third generation [incidentally, what a warning this is to faithful, Godly parents and grandparents today-DFC]. Out of all of Abraham's large and increasing family, only Jacob remained faithful to God. No other family did so well. Of the early churches planted by those filled with the Holy Spirit, fresh from the throne of God, how few remained faithful to God till the third generation! ... Have the churches formed under the ministration of men improved in these things? [Later in this article (p. 1165), Lipscomb lamented division and the causes thereof, but accurately concluded, "The divisions test us all, try our feelings; but to purify the church they must come" (c.f., 1 Cor. 11:19, "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.")-DFC] ("The Apostasy of Churches," 1164).

The weaknesses of men, as Lipscomb referred to them, are responsible for the religious division and confusion in the world today; ironically, in his creed book, the Baptist J.M.

Pendleton actually presented a good argument *against* creeds--and their bases, religious opinion.

Pendleton wrote,

What a man believes the Bible to teach is his Creed [the "C" should not have been capitalized for an obvious reason: God did not author what just any man *believes*-DFC], either written or unwritten. And though it has sometimes been said that creeds have produced differences of religious opinion, it would be nearer to the truth, logically and historically, to say that differences of opinion have produced creeds (42-43).

Opinion and the voicing more loudly opinion than Truth would so mar the church that it would *have* to be restored! God's voice must once more be made to ring out above that of mere man; His Doctrine over man's false doctrines!

### **How Early Church Digressed So Quickly**

What were those first steps away from the ideal? Very soon after the founding of the church, scores of false doctrines began to arise. Some like Novatian and Donatus' late third-century denying of pardon to those who had tried to repent after folding under persecution or like Cyril of Jerusalem's fourth century advocating of "naked baptism" can be written off as merely short-lived foolish whims; however, other of the doctrines originating early still hold sway today.

Many doctrines of the first few centuries were defenses, responses, and counter-responses regarding the Divinity or nature of Christ. One of the earliest, Gnosticism (which was alluded to in 1 Timothy 6:20, seen as something threatening the churches in Colossae and Corinth, and addressed in 1 John), taught that all flesh was evil, that a special, human wisdom or knowledge was paramount [hence the name, *gnosis*, knowledge], and that Jesus was not man and God. This doctrine appeared over many years in many forms--some of which will be dealt with in subsequent paragraphs. Of these, Basilideanism promoted a Greek idea of pansperma [life supernaturally but not Divinely brought forth]; Cainism confused the boundaries of good and evil, making murderous Cain a hero, Docetism taught that Jesus merely seemed to be man and to suffer on the cross; Ebionitism taught that Jesus was like Moses, that is, he was good but not Divine; two sub-forms of Ebionitism Monarchianism, adoptionism and modalism, respectively, taught that Jesus was so good that God adopted Him and that Jesus was just the appearance of God; Marcionism taught that the God of the Old Testament was distinct from the God of the New

Testament; Neo-Platanism taught that the highest state in life could only be arrived at by mental contemplation; Ophitism taught that the Old Testament was a product of the devil; Saturnianism--and Marcionism for that matter--held that the demiurge [a product himself] was the creator; and Valentinianism taught that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were both products of God.

In addition to these and other forms of Gnosticism, were doctrines which also questioned the nature of Christ: Arianism taught that Christ was neither eternal nor of the same nature as the Father; a doctrine called Monophysitism had two camps, Eutychianism and Apollinarianism, respectively, which held that Christ's two natures were fused after the incarnation and that Christ's body was human but that His mind was Divine, the *logos*; Monothelitism taught that Christ's will was Divine. In this same area mention should be made of the doctrine that Mary was *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer, thus Divine herself. There are manifold ripples today which are still felt because of these early false doctrines, from the modern promotion of the Gnostic gospels (e.g., the Gospel of Judas) to the continued holding of Mary as Mediatrix to self gratification to self humiliation and self mutilation.

Many of the early doctrines taught various errors regarding the nature and guilt of sin, the importance of the dead, and even the place of religious leaders. To some degree Gnosticism played a role in some of these areas; for instance, Asceticism viewed all flesh as evil and needing to be subdued, the result of which was the neglecting of what were Divinely given needs including eating and marriage as has been seen through the doctrines of monasticism, celibacy, and others which hold that the spiritual part of man is elevated when the physical is neglected. Manichaeism was an ascetic doctrine which promoted that salvation was accomplished at the release of the soul from the body. The doctrine of Original Sin which would be more fully

realized by Augustine and Calvin was an early doctrine which taught that the guilt for Adam's sin was passed down from generation to generation; that doctrine required a later one, the Immaculate Conception, for Jesus to be able to be born sinless--the problem though is still not really solved, just passed on to Mary. Iconoclasm was a doctrine which elevated images, icons, which had special spiritual significance, for example a saint's bones or a piece of the *true* cross. The more important a saint had been, the more important the objects associated with him. This would, then, be tied closely to Hagiolatry, the worship of departed saints and their relics. The doctrines regarding Purgatory and the sell of indulgences held that there would be a temporary punishment which could be escaped or escaped more quickly based upon the good that one did, or bought, for himself or on behalf of others. Sacerdotalism elevated the priests, clergy, over the members, laity, who were not ordained. This doctrine was hand in hand with the doctrines which ultimately resulted in the hierarchy with the Pope at the top of the proverbial pyramid. Simony was a doctrine which actually allowed the selling of church offices--something which was a natural consequence of the move toward hierarchy.

Then there were early eschatological doctrines, doctrines concerning the end of time. Cerinthus' Millennialism held that Jesus kingdom was earthly and would last a thousand years--not must unlike modern premillennialism. Montanism held that the end was imminent--similar to the misunderstanding in Thessalonica.

These doctrines were magnified because of the attention they received in law-making councils and humanly originated creeds. An A.D. 314 council in Arles, France debated Donatism; the Nicaean council, recognized as the First Ecumenical Council, of 325 debated Arianism; the First Synod of Antioch in 341 debated Roman authority; a 343 Thracian council in

Sardica debated Arianism; a 360 council in Constantinople debated the nature of the "Trinity"; and the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 debated the place of the Holy Spirit and confirmed the findings of the council of Nicaea. That was just the fourth century! Authoritative councils would address Nestorianism and the role of Mary as *Theotokos* (Ephesus in 431), Monophysitism (Chalcedon in 451 and Constantinople in 553), Monothelitism (Constantinople in 680-681), Iconoclasm (Nicaea in 787), and other such issues. Coming out of these meetings were creeds like the Nicene Creed and the Confession of Chalcedon and others. Many creeds followed today are not based on Scripture but are the next steps in these debates, for example Luther's Large Catechism. If the Bible alone were followed all along, there would have been no need for councils or creeds, but it was not!

### **Conclusion**

In this lesson, the writer has examined what made the early church special, why the early church digressed so quickly, and how the early church digressed so quickly. May the Lord's church today be ware of the failings of those who have gone before us and strive to hold to the Bible alone as spiritual Authority!

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