

# *The Great Apostasy and Restoration Movement*

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## **Introduction**

History apportions commendation and condemnation appropriately and that accounts for the reason why history is said to be the best judge. One of the main purposes of history is to preserve the deeds of men from being forgotten. Church history is in no way different. Church, being a New Testament institution, has her origin from the New Testament with her prophecies in the Old Testament of the Holy Writ – the Bible. The church is presented in the Bible as one institution characterized by unity.

However, what we see around us today is nothing but religious confusion with so many different churches having differing, contradictory and conflicting doctrines and way of life with different hopes of eternity. How did it happen? What past efforts had been made? Was there any good result? What can the disciples of Christ today do about it? This forms the major burden of this article.

## **Origin and Growth of the One True Church (The Lord's Church)**

The New Testament reveals the establishment and early growth of the church Jesus Christ promised to build some six months before His death ([Matthew 16:18](#)). He bought the church with His precious blood ([Acts 20:28](#); cf. [John 19:31-37](#)), He loved and gave Himself for the church ([Ephesians 5:23-27](#)). The Lord's will is that **there be only ONE church** for He prayed for the unity of His followers ([John 17:20-23](#)). Later, we read of this church as being one body ([Ephesians 4:4-6](#); cf. [1:22-23](#); [Colossians 1:18, 24](#)). The church came into existence the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2) and since then, the church was always spoken of as something in existence, and people were being added to it ([Acts 2:47](#)). Peter referred to the incident of Acts 2 (Pentecost day) as the beginning ([Acts 11:15-16](#)); which is the beginning of the church as the spiritual reality of the body of Christ and also the visible church at around 33 AD in Jerusalem in line with prophecies ([Dan. 2:44](#); [Isaiah 2:1-3](#); [Micah 4:1-2](#); [Lk. 24:44-49](#)).

The book of Acts beginning with chapter 2 gives the divine history of the church. The church started from a small beginning to be a mighty force in the world ([Matt. 13:31-32](#)). God added about 3000 souls the first day ([Acts 2:41](#)). Soon the number grew to about 5,000 ([Acts 4:4](#)) and multitudes of both men and women were added to the Lord ([Acts 5:14](#); [6:1](#)). Within thirty (30) years Paul could say that the gospel had come to "all the world" and that every creature under the heaven had been preached to ([Col. 1:5-6, 23](#)). The seed of the kingdom ([Luke 8:11](#); [Acts 8:4](#)) was planted and watered and God gave the increase ([1 Cor. 3:6](#)). The book of Acts records the beginning of the church in many different cities: Jerusalem (Acts 2); Samaria (8:5-12); Caesarea (10); Antioch of Syria (11:19-21); Paphos and Antioch of Pisidia (13:6-49); Iconium and Lystra (14:1-23); Philippi (16:12-40); Thessalonica, Berea, Athens (17:1-34); Corinth (18:1-11) and Ephesus (19).

The seed that produces the church is that which determines every characteristic of it. The seed which is the Word of God, not only saves, but also makes people members of the church – called-out, *ekklesia* ([2 Thess. 2:14](#); [Rom. 1:16](#); [Jas. 1:21](#); [1 Pet. 1:23](#)). The Word has to be

respected deeply enough to render obedience ([1 Pet. 1:22](#); [Rom. 6:17-18](#)). Continued respect and obedience **must** characterize the church ([Jude 3](#); [2 Tim3:16-17](#); [Gal. 1:8-9](#); [2 John 9](#)). The church is the one body that is ruled by one head ([Eph. 4:4](#); [Col. 1:18](#); [Matt. 28:18](#); [Eph. 5:23-24](#)). The respect for divine authority will produce many distinctive and identifying features of the Lord's church among which are: sound scriptural teaching, name, worship, work, organization, purity of life. A lack of respect for divine authority will produce corruption in all of these features identified above and bring apostasy and such was what happened as time went by.

## **Apostasy**

Apostasy is a falling away from God's truth. In the first place, we really should not be surprised by the plethora of different churches, for in the Bible itself, we read that there would be "*falling away...*" ([2 Thess. 2:1-3](#)) from God's truth, that is "apostasy." As noted earlier, apostasy is rooted in lack of respect for divine authority.

## **Apostasy Prophesied**

Several prophecies abound in the Bible about the coming of apostasy. For example, Apostle Paul, warned the Ephesian elders (also called shepherds, pastors, bishops, presbyters cf. [1 Peter 5:1-4](#); [Acts 14:23](#); [20:17](#), [28](#)) at Miletus . He informed them of what was about to happen: "*For I know this, ... grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.*" ([Acts 20:27-31](#), IKJV; emphasis, KSA). To the brethren at Thessalonica, he wrote: "*Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction* ([2 Thess. 2:1-3](#), NASB; emphasis, KSA). In warning Timothy, an evangelist in [1 Timothy 4:1-5](#), [2 Timothy 4:1-4](#), and [2:16-18](#), Paul described how some will **depart from the faith** by giving heed to *deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats*. He continued in describing how some would **not endure sound doctrine** by getting teachers who would tell them what they wanted to hear and turning from the truth and turning aside to fables. He also warned Corinthians of false teachers ([2 Corinthians 11:12-14](#)).

It was not only Paul that prophesied about the great apostasy. Peter, Jude and John also did. Peter warned of false teachers to come in his second epistle (2:1-3) that **false teachers would** bring in destructive heresies and would have many followers. Jude warned of false teachers who were present ([Jude 3-4](#), [16-19](#)). He said they had crept in unnoticed and were turning the grace of God into lewdness, denying the Lord God and the Lord Jesus Christ. John, the beloved warned of "antichrists" who had come ([1 John 2:18-19](#); cf. [4:1](#), [5-6](#)). According to him, many, in fact, had come! This was indicative of living in the "last hour."

## **Apostasy Prophecies Fulfilled**

The giant step of great apostasy was never taken at once, but it was a gradual process. The predictions of holy men of God came to fulfillment within 100 years of prediction. As Jesus had warned, there would be false prophets ([Matt. 7:13-20](#)). Before the completion of the New Testament canon, the apostasy was already underway. As we examine early church history,

there are further indications that history is a teacher. Early Christians could have looked about them for evidence that man is prone to depart from the truth. For instance, Adam and Eve were not satisfied with God's perfect order of things ([Gen. 3:6-ff](#)). Adam's descendants departed so far that God found the flood necessary ([Gen. 7:16-24](#)). Note how Nadab and Abihu ([Lev.10:1-2](#)), David ([2 Sam. 11:4](#)), Solomon ([1 Kgs.11:1-8](#)) drifted from the way of the Lord to way of sin and death. The history of Jewish people is a history of their departures from God's law (cf. Judges 1-21, note 2:10-13 and [Hosea 4:6](#)).

Early in the history of the church, there were departures from divine order and pattern even while Apostles were still very much around them. Quickly, one can notice Ananias and Sapphira ([Acts 5:1-11](#)) who drifted away from holiness to lying (what people today would call 'diplomacy'), false teaching concerning circumcision and keeping of the Law (Acts 15, Galatians 1-6, Col. 2, Heb. 7-9). The situation of the Corinthian church was such a bad one in the first century. Among them, we found sectarianism - spirit of denominationalism (1 Cor. 1-3), fornication (1 Cor. 5), taking brethren to court (1 Cor. 6), corruption of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11), erroneous teaching on the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). There were those who were set on "one-man rule" ([3 John 9-10](#)). Five of the seven Asian churches were not faultless. Ephesus had left her first love ([Rev. 2:4](#)). Some at Pergamos held to the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes ([Rev. 2:14-15](#)). The church in Thyatira allowed Jezebel to seduce the Lord's servant ([Rev. 2:20](#)). The church in Sardis was dead ([Rev.3:1](#)). Laodicea was lukewarm (3:16). Only Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (2:7-14) were faultless.

As the years went by, many false teachings and practices were brought in. In 157 AD, Penance was introduced. About the year 318, a controversy arose in Alexandria respecting the person of Christ: was He eternal and divine just as God the Father, or was He a creature, created by God? This controversy necessitated the Nicea Council of June, 325 AD. A great number attended the meeting and decided that Jesus Christ was eternal with the Father. This step was the most significant of all departures. It symbolized the removing of the authority from Jesus, the head, and placing it in the hands of men. With this step of departure, other departures flew in like flood. In 394 AD, Mass was introduced to the worship of the church. Image worship was brought in in 405 AD. Extreme Unction came in 588 AD. In 593 AD, Purgatory was added. Instrumental music was introduced in 570 AD and Celibacy in 1015 AD. The list is now endless, because as you read this article, some false teachers are busy introducing other strange things into the church which is further leading them far away from the truth and making the hope of turning back very slim.

Even though, the step seemed innocent at first with the aim of attempting to deal with errors in and out side of the church which led to a change in the organization of the church from autonomous and independent congregation overseen by a plurality of elders also known as shepherds, pastors, bishops, presbyters ([Acts 14:23](#); [20:17](#), [28](#); [I Peter 5:1-4](#)) to a collectivity of churches under one bishop; resulting in centralization of power and influence among key individuals.

This was achieved by the introduction of distinction between bishop and elder ([Titus 1:5](#), [7](#)) which is scripturally baseless. This step was followed by extension of the authority of the bishop to congregations other than the one that appointed him which was another step into error. This led to city bishops who gradually became known as Metropolitan Bishops. At this time, churches of large area were combined under a single government and such area became known as diocese. With this, one of the Metropolitan Bishops graduated into a Diocesan Bishop.

By the close of 5<sup>th</sup> Century, the octopus of ecclesiasticism had spread until five centres ruled "Christendom." Five Bishops became known as "*Patriarchs*" – the centres are: Jerusalem , Antioch , Constantinople, Rome and Alexandria . The last step in the development of first Pope was taken in 588 AD, when John the Faster who was the Bishop of Constantinople usurped the title of Universal (or Ecumenical) Bishop. After the death of John the Faster (he died in 596 AD), Boniface III who had become Patriarch of Rome, acquired for himself the title of *Universal Bishop* in 606 AD.

This subtle change made it much easier for error to spread when those in power began teaching false doctrine. Before long, the very errors foretold by Paul and others were being taught (cf. [1Tim. 4:1-3](#)). Through slow but gradual changes, the seeds of modern churches were sown producing what later became known as the Roman Catholic Church with many other "orthodox" churches (Greek, Egyptian, Russian, Armenian, etc.).

Just as foretold, many departed from the simplicity of the Lord's church and fell into apostasy. Apostasy grew as many types of Councils were held. Among these were: the Council of Nicea (325, 787 AD), Constantinople (318, 553, 680 AD), Ephesus (431 AD), Chalcedon (451 AD) with the following doctrines enacted contrary to the sound teachings of the Bible: Clergy/Laity System, Sprinkling for Immersion, Infant Baptism, Celibacy, Instrumental Music, Transubstantiation, Indulgences, Worship of Mary, Veneration of Relics, Purgatory, Confessionals, Images, Penance, Extreme Unction, Confirmation, Nuns, Primacy of Peter, Forbidding to Eat Meats, Religious Holidays and others.

In all these, the church of Christ continued ([Matt. 16:18](#); [Dan. 2:44](#); [Luke 1:32-33](#)). Even though not popular, or probably treated as heretics.

### **Reformation Movement and the Development of Denominations**

Throughout the history of apostasy, many came to realize what had happened, and efforts were made to rectify the problem. This became known as reformation. The elements behind the reformation movement

were the corrupt practices of Catholicism, internal problems of Catholicism leading to split (1054 AD), the Inquisition (1229-1834 AD), the Renaissance, translation of Bible into different languages, invention of the printing press (1454) by John Guttenberg. Those that attempted to reform the apostate church were persecuted: either executed or expelled (e.g. Martin Luther). Unfortunately, followers of such reformers often started new churches (e.g. Lutheran) against the mindset of such reformer. Other reformers were The Albigenses, Wardenses, Peter De Bruys ( France ), John Wycliff ( England ), John Huss ( Bohemia ), John Calvin, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli, Henry VIII – Church of England, John & Charles Wesley – Methodist church. The period of these gentlemen was a period of Protestant denominational births instead of being a reformation period. Catholic Church was the first to fall away from divine pattern in 606 AD, followed by Greek Catholic (1054 AD). With the reformation movements, the following denominational churches were given birth to: Lutheran (1521), Church of England (1534), Methodist (1739), Pentecostal Movements [Church of God (1880), Nazarene (1895), Pentecostal (1896), Assembly of God (1914)], Presbyterian Church (1541), Baptist Church (1607), Mormons (1830), Seventh Day Adventist (1843), Jehovah Witness (1872), Christian Science (1875), etc. All the attempts and efforts of these men were similar to the reformation of Jehu in 2 Kings, chapters 9 and 10. God commanded him to destroy Ahab's family (vs.4-10). He killed several people but fell

short of restoring the true worship ([2 Kgs. 10:29-31](#)). He corrected some wrongs but kept others. This is the exact pattern that all reformation movements (both old and modern) follow.

## Restoration Movements

The call for the restoration of church of the New Testament to its original state is centred on restoring the New Testament pattern for the local church in **organization, worship, work, life, hope**, etc. The following four basic principles have been the focus:

1. New Testament scriptures as the only authoritative rule of faith and practice.
2. Renunciation of all human creeds be it manual, discipline, catechism, etc. Human Creeds are divisive by their very nature and the acceptance of the precepts and examples of Jesus as the only creed binding upon Christians.
3. Restore Apostolic or New Testament concept of the Church in the minds of men.
4. Unity of all Christians upon the basis of the Bible.

Some of those who were outstanding during the restoration period are: James O'Kelly, Elias Smith and Abner Jones, Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell and Alexander Campbell.

*James O'Kelly:* He was a Methodist preacher who worked in Virginia and North Carolina . On many occasions he found himself at odds with Francis Asbury, the Bishop. He advocated congregational autonomy and disagreed over appointment procedures of the conference. He appealed to the conference for a change in the procedures in 1792 but he, Rice Haggard and three other preachers were denied at the Conference and they withdrew themselves and formed a body known as the " Republican Methodist Church " in 1793. In 1794, this name was rejected and the group declared the Bible as sufficient guide and wanted to be known as Christians. From this standpoint, the movement devised what became known as the "Five Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church." Weaknesses can be seen in these "Principles" but that these people were on their way back to the ancient order is evident.

*Elias Smith(1769 - \_\_):* He was baptized into Baptist Church in 1789 when he was greatly concerned over the subject of baptism. He began to preach for Baptist Church shortly thereafter; even though he had some misgivings about certain doctrines held by the Baptists. This motivated an intense investigation of Bible teaching. In the spring of 1802, he rejected Calvinism and found that the name of the followers of Christ to be Christians ([Acts 11:26](#)) without addition of the words "Baptist," "Methodist," etc. He left Baptist and worshiped with 5 members in rented hall in Portsmouth . He proclaimed Christ as One and Only Lawgiver. One of the amazing things about these activities was that the men involved had no contact with or knowledge of the others. In 1803, he was visited by Dr. Abner Jones ( Vermont ), a medical doctor and Baptist Preacher. Jones had left the Baptist Church in 1801 and had rejected human names also and contended for absolute authority of the New Testament. After 1803, Smith and Jones joined forces and established churches free of denominational ties.

*Barton W. Stone (1772-1844):* He was 18 years old when he went to the famous school of David Caldwell near Greensboro in order to be admitted to the bar. While there, he heard James McGready, a popular Presbyterian preacher and a year or so later, he joined the Presbyterian Church and began to preach in North Carolina . He moved to Cane Ridge , Kentucky and was ordained a minister. When asked at his ordination if he received the

Confession of Faith, he replied, "I do, as far as I see it consistent with the Word of God." As he preached, he appealed directly to the Word of God and soon rejected the doctrine of total depravity. He then began to preach the universality of the gospel and faith as a condition of salvation. In 1801, plans were for great revival at Cane Ridge, the revival was estimated to have been attended by between 20,000 to 30,000 attendees. As a result of the revival, trouble developed with the Presbyterian synod. As a result of differences, Stone and 4 others withdrew from the synod to form their own called "The Springfield Presbytery" in 1803. In 1804, they recognized error of forming another Presbytery and therefore dissolved the Springfield Presbytery. On June 28, 1804, they issued "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery."

*Thomas Campbell (1763 – 1854):* He was a Presbyterian preacher in Ireland and because of his poor health went to America for relief. He arrived Philadelphia in the spring of 1807 and presented himself to the Synod and was assigned to Chartiers Presbytery in Pennsylvania . He preached things contrary to Presbyterian doctrine. He opposed all human creeds and contended for the all-sufficiency of the Bible. He was suspended by the synod in 1808 but continued to preach in homes, schools, and out in the open. He coined the phrase "Where the Bible speaks, we speak, and where the Bible is silent, we are silent." In one of his meetings, when he finished the sermon with the phrase above, as soon as he sat down, there was silence. Andrew Munro broke the silence with this statement: "Mr. Campbell, if we adopt that as a basis, then there is an end to infant baptism." Campbell replied: "If infant baptism be not found in the Scriptures, we can have nothing to do with it." In 1809, he wrote the *Declaration and Address* in which he set forth the famous slogan, "In faith, unity; in opinion, liberty; in all things, charity."

*Alexander Campbell (1788-1866):* He was 20 years old when his father sent for the family to come to America . He arrived America in 1809 from Northern Ireland . Reunited with his father, he read through *Declaration and Address* shortly after his arrival. He resolved to devote his life to studying the word of God and proclaiming it. He preached his first sermon in 1810 at the Brush Run. Soon, the subject of baptism began to trouble him and from his study he learned and concluded that infants were not proper subjects of baptism. Besides he learned the action was immersion and not sprinkling or pouring of water. He also learned that confession of faith should precede baptism and not the relating of an experience as practiced by Baptist Church . He and six others were baptized on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1812; and practically the entire Brush Run church followed example. This action made enemies of the Presbyterians and caused Baptists to become his friends. He joined the Redstone Association of Baptist Churches, defended the cause of baptism in two debates and declared that baptism was not administered to a member of the church. This caused a rift between Alexander Campbell and the Redstone Association and he was charged with heresy, but acquitted. In 1823, he withdrew from Redstone and joined Mahoning Association but found this to be unscriptural in 1830 and then dissolved the association.

*"Raccoon" John Smith (born 1784):* He had Baptist background. When he desired "experience," he was told to pray and wait upon the Lord. After his father's death in 1804 he began to seek assurance, prayed earnestly, found some relief and related to Baptist Church . In 1804, he was unanimously voted a subject of a work of grace and desired to preach but faced two obstacles: **Ignorance**; could barely read and **Lacked a supernatural call**. He moved to Alabama in 1814 during which he lost his children in fire and his wife died. Immediately, he returned to Kentucky ; Crab Orchard area and eventually discovered the truth and preached zealously. He was rejected by old friends, but he persevered and converted

many. He met Alexander Campbell in 1824. He participated in unity meetings of 1831-32. During these meetings he delivered one of the great speeches of his life. "God hath but one people on the earth. He has given to them one Book, and therein exhorts and commands them to be one family... Let us then, brethren, be no longer Campbellites, or Stoneites, or New Lights, or Old Lights, or any other kind of lights, but let us all come to the Bible, and the Bible alone, as the only Book in the world that can give us all the light we need."

In Nigeria , the restoration movement began with E. O. Essien who was a member of Presbyterian church. He became dissatisfied with the worship, organization and the work of the church, having studied the Bible and opportune to have read through a correspondence on "Back to the Bible" which he picked up by the roadside in 1959. He was interested and wrote to the address on the correspondence course material this led to the visit of some American evangelists to the south-east of Nigeria in 1948. Since then, churches of Christ have been growing in Nigeria and spreading with the aid of faithful men of God sowing nothing but the pure seed of the kingdom ([Luke 8:11](#)).

### **Apostasies following Restoration**

Faithful men of God must keep abreast of the word of God, knowing fully well that not until we cross the river, we will have issues on hand to battle with. There are issues which are capable of leading us astray. In this present age, we have issues such as our basic attitudes toward authority – Liberal versus Conservative, worldliness (in terms of immodesty, mixed swimming, dancing, social drinking, gambling, lottery, marriage divorce, and remarriage), assault on worship, new preaching style, church music, lifting up of hands in prayer, handclapping, female leadership, religious holidays, babies dedication, church discipline, creation: Literal or Non-literal, house church movement, fellowship of those who teach error, etc. The problem of those that have drifted away from the past had been lack of scriptural authority. Bible still says "... *whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...*" ([Col. 3:17](#)) and "*If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God...*" ([1 Pet. 4:11](#)).

### **Conclusion**

Apostasy is rooted in lack of respect for divine authority, that is, when God's will is set aside. The only sure antidote against apostasy is to reverse apostasy's course. The truth of God will produce the church; only the truth of God, faithfully followed, will assure God's approval here and His welcome words: "Enter thou into the joys of thy Lord." All what we have noticed under the Restoration Movement were done by a group of men who determined to sow nothing but the pure seed of the kingdom which is the gospel of Christ ([Luke 8:11](#)). The principle of restoration works provided that we allow the Word of God to be our **only** guide and authority - cf. [Acts 20:32](#); [2Tim. 3:16-17](#) and if we do not allow traditions of men to replace the commands of God - cf. [Matt. 15:3-9](#). **Otherwise we plant the seeds of apostasy and denominationalism all over again!**

When the seed was planted in the hearts of honest men and women in the New Testament period, it produced Christians and nothing less or more. By the preaching of the word, churches of Christ were established in every major city of the Roman Empire and so by preaching of the gospel, the church of the Lord was restored to the world. May we all realise that the hope of the world in this century is the same gospel.

As followers of Jesus, we will do well to imitate His service to God while on earth. Living under the Law of Moses, one could simply be a Jew (not a Pharisee, Sadducee, etc.). Living under the law of Christ ([1Cor. 9:21](#)) today, we should simply be Christians, not members of some denominational party- cf. [1 Cor. 1:10-13](#).

Reader, what are you religiously? Are you involved with the descendants of the apostasy foretold in the Scriptures? Or are you one of those whose response to the falling away has resulted in another denomination? Why not simply be a Christian, by letting the Word of God restore you back to the church of our Lord as revealed in the New Testament...? (cf. [Acts 2:36-42](#), [47](#)). Follow the Bible in order to be simply a Christian. God help us to believe the gospel, obey it, and then preach it to every creature under heaven. This you can do by believing the gospel of Christ, repent of your sins, confess your faith in Christ, be baptised in water for the remission of your sins and continue to live a holy life in accordance with the Bible.

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