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“Watch and Remember”: The New Testament and the Great Apostasy

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Since its beginning, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has proclaimed to the world that there was an apostasy of the church which had been founded by Jesus during his earthly ministry and led by his apostles following his ascension.¹ This is a fundamental belief of the restored church. In fact, it is the apostasy of early Christianity which creates the very need for the restored Latter-day Saint faith: if there had not been an apostasy, there would have been no need for a restoration.²

Latter-day Saint theology asserts that the church of Jesus and his apostles came to an end not long after its formation; the doctrines which its inspired leaders taught were corrupted and changed by others not of similar inspiration (1 Nephi 13:26-27), the authority to act in God's name was taken from the earth, and the Christian systems that existed in the world after those developments did not enjoy divine endorsement. It was precisely the question of divine endorsement—in Joseph Smith's words, “which of all the sects was right” (Joseph Smith-History 1:18)—that led to the glorious event that ushered in the restoration of the gospel: the appearance of the Father and the Son to the young prophet. In response to Joseph Smith's search for a true church, he was told to join none of them, “for they were all wrong,” and all their creeds were “an abom-

ination" in the sight of God (Joseph Smith-History 1:19).³ The message of the Latter-day Saints is that following seventeen centuries of darkness since the days of the apostles, the heavens were again opened, divinely authored doctrines were revealed anew, the authority to speak and act in God's name was brought back to earth, and the church of Jesus Christ was established again by divine command.

In this paper the apostasy will be discussed on two fronts. First I will examine statements of Jesus and his apostles that foretell the passing of the early church. Then I will consider the evidence in the New Testament that shows apostasy taking place as the New Testament documents were being written.

1. THE APOSTASY FORETOLD

The writings of the New Testament contain several statements made by Jesus and his apostles about the future of their work. Though they labored with great zeal to bring souls to the Lord and to establish the church throughout the world, still their prophetic utterances concerning the end result of their efforts foretold tragedy. In short, they knew that the church would fall into apostasy shortly after their time, and they bore candid testimony of that fact. The following prophetic passages demonstrate that Jesus and his apostles foreknew and foretold the falling of the church.

Matthew 24:5, 9-11

One of the Savior's most significant sermons, the Olivet Discourse, is recorded in Matthew 24-25. In response to questions of the Twelve with regard to the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem and the destruction of the world (see Joseph Smith-Matthew 1:4, 21), Jesus prophesied of events which would transpire in the near and distant future, especially regarding the Jews (Joseph Smith-Matthew 1:21). In this connection, Matthew 24:9-11 records a proph-

ecy of great importance concerning the future of the apostles:

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.⁴

The Joseph Smith-Matthew rendering of this passage places it clearly in the context of the first century A.D. (Joseph Smith-Matthew 1:4-21). A number of important statements are contained in these verses. Matthew 24:9 foretells the fate of the apostles themselves: affliction, hatred, and death for Christ's sake (cf. also John 16:1-4). The only scripturally attested fulfillment of the martyrdom prophecy is the death of James at the hands of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2), but early Christian tradition tells of similar fates for other apostles. Yet the killing of the apostles was not the cause of the apostasy. Other references clearly teach that Christianity died from an internal wound, the rejection of true doctrine by the members of the church.

Matthew 24:10 provides a valuable prophecy of the rejection of truth by many of the saints. Unfortunately, the King James translation obscures its intended meaning beyond modern recognition with the phrase "then shall many be offended." In the New International Version (NIV), an excellent recent translation, we read: "At that time many will turn away from the faith." From the Phillips Modern English Version: "Then comes the time when many will lose their faith." The Greek verb *skandalízo* in the passive voice (here a third person plural, future tense), means, in a theological sense, "to give up one's faith." "Many," the Savior foretold, will do it at that day. Only those who remain steadfast and are not overcome will be saved (Joseph Smith-Matthew 1:11).

Matthew 24:11 records the additional prophecy that many false prophets would arise and would “deceive *many*” (emphasis added). Recall that the historical context here is the last days of the apostolic era, when the apostles would be afflicted, hated, and killed (Matthew 24:9). Attempting to take their places would be what the Savior calls “many false prophets.” The related passage in Matthew 24:5 is also significant: “For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.” Notice that there would be *many* false Christs, and, like the false prophets, they would deceive *many*. One can only lament the fact that the available sources, scriptural and nonscriptural, give us little history of the fulfillment of these words.

Acts 20:29-31

On his way from Greece to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, the apostle Paul stopped at the city of Miletus and called for the elders of nearby Ephesus. On their arrival he gave an important address (Acts 20:18-35). The prophecy relevant to the future of the flock over which these elders were “overseers” (Acts 20:28) reads as follows:

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears (Acts 20:29-31).

Paul warned the elders of Asia that following his departure evil forces would damage the church there greatly. “Grievous wolves” would invade and would not spare the flock. At this point in Paul’s career, he had experienced years of trouble with Judaizers trying to gain influence among his converts. Perhaps it was similar infiltration of

apostate forces that Paul foresaw. It should be recalled that the Judaizers, who had already had great success opposing Paul (e.g., Galatians 1:6), were members of the church. What is being alluded to with the wolf metaphor is undoubtedly not physical attack or external persecution. Instead, Paul was describing the entering of evil forces *into* the church and their gaining power over the saints. That this is the meaning of Paul's words is borne out by verse 30, referring to those in the Asian church—some of whom may have been in Paul's audience as he spoke—who would, in an effort to draw away disciples to themselves, "distort the truth" (Acts 20:30, NIV, REB). Paul ended his prophecy by testifying that for three years he had warned the Asian saints constantly, "with tears," to "watch and remember" (Acts 20:31). Similarly, in his great prophecy of apostasy in 2 Thessalonians, which will be examined next, he also bore witness to the saints that he had warned them well of the coming fall (2 Thessalonians 2:5).

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

In his first Thessalonian letter Paul cleared up a doctrinal misunderstanding concerning the status of those who would die prior to the Second Coming of Jesus. In the second he warned them of a much greater doctrinal problem—the belief that the "day of Christ" was "at hand" (2 Thessalonians 2:2). We do not know the details of Paul's concern here.⁵ Whatever the exact misunderstanding of the Thessalonians may have been, Paul explained that the day of Christ's coming would not take place until after a "falling away" and the revelation of the "man of sin," "the son of perdition" (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

The King James words "falling away" are translated from the Greek noun *apostasia*, from which we get our word "apostasy," which is equal to it in meaning. Whereas the term "falling away" may give the incorrect impression of a process of drifting or gradually losing ground, the original

term means something much more drastic. Some modern translations use the terms “the rebellion” (NIV, RSV), “rejection of God” (Phillips), or “the Great Revolt” (JB). The two Greek elements combined in *apostasia* are the verb *histemi*, “to stand,” and *apo*, “away from”; the basic meaning of the word is “revolution.” Ancient sources used the term to describe political rebellion and revolution.⁶ What Paul was describing was a revolution against God and his position in the church. And, as he wrote in the following verses, the revolution would succeed.

The chief feature of this revolution would be the triumph of the “man of sin.” Paul wrote:

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 (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

Latter-day Saint commentators generally equate the “man of sin” mentioned in these verses with Satan, an interpretation with which I concur.⁷ As part of the rebellion, Paul noted, Satan would be made manifest. He would exalt himself over all that is called divine in order to assume the place of God and supplant him from his position. The metaphorical term “temple” probably refers to the church, as also in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and Ephesians 2:21.⁸ If Paul did have the church in mind here, it is of historical and theological significance that the church survives. But God is not at its head, making that church—following the appearance in it of Satan—no longer the church of God.

Paul’s words correspond well with evidence that we have from other scriptures. When the Lord appeared to Joseph Smith in the spring of 1820, he told the young prophet that all of the Christian churches of his day were

"wrong" (Joseph Smith-History 1:19). The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi envisioned in the latter days following the Restoration only *two* churches: "the church of the Lamb of God" and "the church of the devil" (1 Nephi 14:10). Since whoever does not belong to "the church of the Lamb of God" belongs to "the church of the devil," as Nephi announced, then all systems of worship outside of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be classified as "the church of the devil" by Nephi's definition.⁹ It appears that Paul was making the same point as he foretold the "man of sin" supplanting God in the era of the revolution.

To suggest that fallen Christianity has Satan at its head in the place of God is certainly not to say that all that is in it is satanic. Indeed, Latter-day Saints should rejoice—as the heavens undoubtedly do—at the great works of righteousness and faith, and the leavening influence on the world, of those whose lives are touched in any degree by him whose gospel the Saints enjoy in its fulness. But it is only in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—which the Lord himself has proclaimed to be "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth with which I the Lord am well pleased" (D&C 1:30)—that "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16) is found. The restoration of the fulness of the gospel, with its priesthood and other blessings, took place because it is only in *its* light that salvation in its true sense is possible to humankind. While these features are absent as Satan sits enthroned in what was once the Lord's church, Satan's goal of hindering God's children from returning to their Father's glory is realized. How appropriate therefore is Paul's description of him sitting in the place of God in the church of the *apostasia*.¹⁰

In the next verse, Paul punctuated his prophecy by reminding the saints that when he had been with them personally, he had taught them of the apostasy and the

coming of Satan: "Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?" (2 Thessalonians 2:5). But his message did not stop there. Even at that time, said Paul, the "man of sin" was being restrained "from appearing before his appointed time" (2 Thessalonians 2:6, JB). "For the mystery of lawlessness [KJV: 'mystery of iniquity'] is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed" (2 Thessalonians 2:7, RSV). In these verses Paul stated that the overt manifestation of Satan was still in the future. Yet even then the "mystery of iniquity" was operating, waiting in the wings, as it were, for its chance to come to the fore. Paul wrote of some force which restrained the "man of sin" from making his appearance before his time. It is not altogether clear whether he was referring to the Lord, the collective power of the apostleship, or something or someone else as the obstacle to the dominance of the "man of sin." In any case, the message comes through clearly that Satan and his works were at that time already operational but were being held back until the divine power that restrained them would be removed. "And then shall that wicked one be revealed" (2 Thessalonians 2:8, JST).¹¹

In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 Paul told of the deceptive power of Satan and his apostate priesthood. They would come with "power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). Those who would follow them are they who "received not the love of the truth," who "believe a lie," and who "believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). In short, Satan's work, accompanied by signs and miracles meant to counterfeit those of the Lord's true servants, would prosper because many would reject the truth and believe falsehood. Paul, therefore, exhorted his converts to "stand fast" unto

"the obtaining of the glory" to which they were called (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15).

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 constitutes perhaps the most important prophecy in the New Testament concerning the apostasy. Scholars of all perspectives generally agree that Paul was, in fact, expressing his belief in a rebellion of some sort against God that would precede the anticipated second advent of Jesus Christ.¹² Through the light of the restored gospel, Latter-day Saints can understand the full implications of this rebellion.¹³

1 Timothy 4:1-3

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he prophesied concerning the departure of some of the saints from the faith:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving to them which believe and know the truth (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

This prophecy has a number of features that make it of considerable interest. First of all, Paul specifically stated that his belief in the future defection was the result of revelation. In fact, not only did the Spirit speak these words to Paul, but it did so "expressly." The chronological note is also important. Paul used the term "latter times" (*hústeroi kairoi*) to denote the period in which the developments that he foretold would take place. In the ultimate sense, the period of time in which we now live can be called "the latter times" better than any other. As we learn through modern revelation, our day is the dispensation of the fulness of times—the preparatory era that precedes the Second Coming of the Savior. Yet Paul spoke using a different definition for "latter times." His focus was on the last days

of the Christianity of his era, the "latter times" of the early church.

A few decades after Paul foretold the departure of some from the faith in the "latter times," Jude announced to his readers that they were then in "the last time" (*eschatos chronos*, Jude 1:17-19). Similarly, John expressed to the readers of his first letter the certainty of the fact that they themselves were in "the last hour" (*eschatē hora*, 1 John 2:18-19). With the revealed knowledge of important future events, John and Jude knew that they were not in the final era of the world. But their words reveal the fact that they knew that they were in the final days of the Christian church. That was the period of time concerning which the spirit spoke "expressly" (1 Timothy 4:1) to Paul.

As we have seen in other prophecies examined so far, the departure from the faith would be a rebellion against true principles of doctrine. Paul wrote that those who would depart would give heed to what he calls "seducing spirits" and "doctrines of devils." It must be emphasized that what Paul saw was not an abandonment of religion but a shifting of loyalties from "the faith" to a false faith. Accompanying this defection would be the manifestation of the negative character traits cited in 1 Timothy 4:2.

1 Timothy 4:3 is interesting because it mentions two examples of the false ideas that the counterfeit religious system would foster: a prohibition against marriage and a prohibition against certain foods. Beyond that the Apostle gave no further details.

In his prophecy in 1 Timothy, Paul did not express any of the feelings of doom or urgency that are so obvious in the letters of his fellow apostle John, written about thirty-five years later. Yet for Paul the present danger was real enough that he admonished Timothy personally to reject strange ideas (1 Timothy 4:7) and to remind "the brethren" of his warnings (1 Timothy 4:6).

2 Timothy 4:3-4

Paul's final prophecy of the abandonment of true religion is found in the last chapter of 2 Timothy. After exhorting Timothy to "continue in the things" which he had learned (2 Timothy 3:14), Paul spoke of those who would pervert the truth:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4, NIV).

This passage paints a picture of rejection of the truth that is consistent in every detail with the other prophecies examined so far. In the verses that precede it, Paul charged Timothy strongly to "preach," "correct, rebuke and encourage" (NIV) the saints. Verse 3 reveals that the reason for his urgency is the fact that he knew that a time was coming in which men would no longer accept the truth. Paul's desire in this, his last preserved letter, was to hold off the onslaught of the inevitable revolution. As has been noted already, what he foresaw was not an abandonment of religion. Much more serious than that, it was a willful rejection of true doctrine and its replacement by doctrines which were untrue but more to the liking of those who would hear them. Notice that the people involved, although unwilling to put up with correct teachings, desired teachings nonetheless. Having "itching ears," i.e., a desire to hear religion, they would acquire teachers whose doctrines were acceptable to them. The final outcome of their actions would be the abandonment of truth and the acceptance of "fables" (2 Timothy 4:4).

2 Peter 2:1-3

Paul was not alone among the apostles in prophesying doom for early Christianity. In 2 Peter, the chief apostle foretold the introduction of false teachers into the church:

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of (2 Peter 2:1-2).

These false teachers, according to Peter, would “secretly introduce” (NIV) “damnable heresies.” So successful would they be that as a result of their efforts, “the way of truth” would be blasphemed (future passive from *blasphē-meo*).¹⁴ 2 Peter 2:3 tells us more: “In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up” (NIV). This tells us something concerning their purpose: to exploit the members of the church (“make merchandise of you,” 2 Peter 2:3, KJV), and their method of doing so: by making up doctrine – “sheer fabrications” (REB).

1 John 2:18; Jude 1:4, 17-18

There are a few passages in the New Testament that give evidence *indirectly* that an apostasy had been foretold. Of these the most informative are found in 1 John 2:18 and Jude 1:4, 17-18. These verses actually speak of apostasy already present in the church. While doing so they make mention of the fact that the saints knew that it should come and had been warned appropriately. John wrote: “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time” (1 John 2:18, emphasis added). This passage will be discussed more fully below. What is important at this point is the fact that John reminded the saints to whom he wrote that they had heard earlier that a time would come – called the “last time” (*eschatē horā*) – in which “antichrist” would come among the church. They had been warned. Similarly, Jude wrote:

Certain people have infiltrated among you, *and they*

are the ones you had a warning about, in writing, long ago, when they were condemned for denying all religion, turning the grace of our God into immorality, and rejecting our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4, JB, emphasis added).

This passage, which is much less clear in the King James Version, tells that the readers had received written warning in the past of the coming of “godless men” (NIV) who would pervert the gospel and reject the Lord. After writing more about those predicted apostates and likening them to some of more ancient times, Jude continued:

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit (Jude 1:17-19, NIV, emphasis added).

The coming in the “last times” (*eschatos chronos*) of those who would scoff at the true faith had been foretold, according to Jude, by “the apostles.”

Revelation 13:1-9

The final prophecy to be examined is found in Revelation 13. Here we read John’s vision of the victory of the forces of Satan over the saints of the Lord. In chapter 12 John characterized the continual conflict between Satan and the works of God as the efforts of a red dragon—Satan—to destroy a woman and her children. In Revelation 12:17 we read, “And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” This is part of an ongoing conflict that has existed since before humankind was placed on the earth, and it will continue until Satan suffers final defeat following the Millennium (Revelation 20:10).

The episode from that conflict which is recorded in Revelation 13 is directly relevant to the end of the early Christian church. As the vision continued, John saw the appearance of a beast, "having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy" (Revelation 13:1). This beast was the agent of the dragon, Satan, from whom he had received "his power and his throne and great authority" (Revelation 13:2, NIV). In John's narrative we find the beast blaspheming God, God's name, his dwelling place, and those who live in heaven (cf. *blasphēmeō* in 2 Peter 2:2). John continued: "And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, *and to overcome them*: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations" (Revelation 13:7, emphasis added). Without yielding to the temptation to attach rigid interpretations to John's metaphors, I feel that the information provided is sufficient to enable us to draw two conclusions about the beast, its identity, and its work.

First of all, it is a deputy of Satan; it derives its power from him and does his work (Revelation 13:2, 4). As God's work is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39), Satan's and that of his beast is to do the opposite. In the Joseph Smith Translation the beast is "in the likeness of the kingdoms of the earth" (Revelation 13:1, JST). "Kingdom" in a scriptural context can mean, of course, any kind of institution, movement, force, or power—religious, political, or otherwise.¹⁵

The second statement that we can make concerning the beast is that it accomplished what it was sent to do. Verse 7 records the tragic fact that it succeeded: it overcame the saints. In viewing John's beast in the light of its context in Revelation 13 and other prophetic statements concerning the fall of the church, we can identify it as the institutions or forces of Satan that prevailed over early Christianity during and following the time of the apostles. As for the

nature of those forces, it should be remembered that the scriptures that we have examined so far present in clear focus the prophetic vision of the apostles: the cause of the apostasy would be the rejection of the truth by the members of the church. In this light, the beast seen by John that overcame the saints might be interpreted best as being Christianity itself—not the Christianity of Jesus, Peter, John, and Paul, but the Christianity that overcame the saints and apostles and survived into the next generation, “in the likeness of the kingdoms of the earth” (Revelation 13:1, JST).¹⁶

The scriptural passages examined above demonstrate that Jesus and his apostles knew that the church which they headed would come to an end shortly after their generation.¹⁷ They bore a somber witness to that knowledge in the record that they left behind in the New Testament. All Christians who take seriously the apostolic testimony must reckon with the prophetic word of the inspired witnesses that the forces of false religion would prevail over those of the truth; the church which was guided by the power of the apostleship in the first century would no longer exist in the second.

2. THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

One of the strongest witnesses of the Latter-day Saint view of the apostasy of New Testament Christianity is the New Testament itself. Not only does it prophesy that apostasy would take place in the church, but just as significantly it actually records apostasy happening as its books were being written. Its pages record the continuing struggle of the apostles to keep the church free of false ideas and practices. As the first century A.D. progressed, the heresies against which the apostles contended became increasingly virulent and increasingly successful, as the record attests. Near the end of the first century, the apostolic record came to a sudden close.

In order to demonstrate the extent to which the apostasy developed and grew in the first century A.D., I will examine in chronological order several issues from the New Testament epistles and from Revelation. It will become apparent that during the course of the first century, the doctrinal and behavioral problems against which the apostles struggled increased until the apostles could no longer reverse the trend of false religion and save the church from itself. In the earliest letters, written midway through the first century, the apostles had to contend with relatively harmless issues of doctrinal misunderstanding. By the time of the last-written letters at the end of the century, the heresies mentioned are of such a malignant nature that they clearly would destroy the original faith if they were not corrected. The evidence tells us that they were not.

1 and 2 Thessalonians (ca. A.D. 50-51)

In the Thessalonian letters the doctrinal problems to which Paul had to address himself were such that they could, presumably, be corrected fairly easily. In both letters, misunderstandings concerning Jesus' Second Coming are evident. In 1 Thessalonians the problem was the belief that those who were alive when the Second Coming took place would have an advantage over those who had died previously (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). Paul comforted the saints concerning their faithful dead by telling them that those "who are left alive until the Lord's coming will not have any advantage over those who have died" (1 Thessalonians 4:15, JB). In the second letter, Paul responded to the belief that the "day of Christ" was "at hand" (2 Thessalonians 2:2). He refuted the idea by prophesying of the apostasy that would precede that day (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

We can assume that a belief such as that to which Paul responded in 2 Thessalonians could have grave implications for the Church. We should conclude, perhaps, that

without Paul's corrective letter the Thessalonian saints may have developed greater problems. The church was fortunate to have an apostle like Paul, who by virtue of his apostolic priesthood authority and divinely endowed spiritual gifts could speak the Lord's word to insure the integrity of the church. One might ask, what happens to the church when such men are no longer in it?

James (ca. mid-50s A.D.)

In the letter of James it is clear that the apostle-writer was contending against incorrect ideas concerning the nature of faith vis-à-vis Christian works. His corrective words include, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26). An under-emphasis of the works of the gospel is perhaps not the kind of problem that would bring all of Christianity to ruin, and James gave us no hint that he expected wholesale apostasy because of it. Yet those who were guilty of disregarding the importance of works had a "dead" religion, to use James's word, and a "dead" religion certainly has no power to save. Perhaps without James's letter more serious problems could have developed.

1 Corinthians (ca. A.D. 56)

As indicated by 1 Corinthians, the church at Corinth had serious problems both in doctrine and in behavior soon after it was founded. Paul wrote this letter, in which he dealt with several unrelated matters, in an effort to correct problems that had come to his attention. I will focus only on a few of them.

In 1 Corinthians 1-4 Paul wrote concerning factions or divisions that had developed in the Corinthian church around various authorities. The mere thought that some may have been focusing their allegiance on him rather than on Christ was so offensive to Paul that he considered himself fortunate that he had not baptized more into the church

(1 Corinthians 1:14-16). He showed his alarm by asking, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). And he told the saints that they were carnal, rather than spiritual, because of their misguided allegiance to individuals (1 Corinthians 3:3-7). It can be argued that this problem in lesser degrees is not the stuff from which apostasy develops. It is clear, however, that if left uncorrected it could result in factions that could bring more serious problems and heretical ideas into the church.

In chapter 5 Paul reprimanded the Corinthian saints in strong terms for allowing a case of incest to go uncorrected. He commanded in the name of the Lord that the guilty party be excommunicated. Paul said, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6), speaking of the damaging potential of allowing a moral problem as serious as incest to remain unpurged. It should be recalled that a few years later Paul prophesied that the abandonment of true religion would be accompanied by the acceptance of degenerate standards of moral behavior (2 Timothy 3:1-4). The Corinthians were blessed to have Paul's letter to warn them of the danger.

1 Corinthians deals with *doctrinal* heresies as well; Paul felt a need to explain the correct use of the Lord's supper (chap. 11) and spiritual gifts (chaps. 12-14). Yet perhaps the most revealing doctrinal problem at Corinth was the belief of some that there was no resurrection. In chapter 15 Paul gave a series of arguments to establish the validity of the doctrine that Jesus rose from the dead and that all people would do likewise. It is clear that there were some at Corinth who disbelieved this doctrine, and Paul wrote with passion to correct their error, pointing out that Christianity is meaningless if there is no resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-19). Christianity is, almost by definition, the belief that Jesus rose from the dead. Paul had been chosen to bear witness to that fact (Acts 1:22; 26:16). He

recognized that denial of that truth was in fact denial of the faith, and he wrote with the power of the apostleship to prevent it.

To deal with each of these issues at Corinth, Paul wrote decisively and firmly. We have no way of knowing to what degree his letter solved the problems by motivating the Corinthian congregation to reject the false ideas that were circulating among them. But the issues involved were serious and potentially very damaging. One can only wonder what would have happened without the corrective efforts of an inspired leader like Paul.

2 Corinthians (ca. A.D. 57)

For the purposes of this study, one particular aspect of 2 Corinthians is significant. This is the letter in which Paul was most revealing of himself, his problems, and his actions. Among the Corinthians were some who had attacked Paul's doctrine and his dedication to the work of the Lord. Paul felt that the situation was serious enough that he needed to defend himself by speaking frankly in his own behalf. Against his own better judgment he boasted of his sacrifices in behalf of the gospel. He told of his beatings, imprisonments, stonings, shipwrecks, pain, hunger, and thirst, and of his visions and revelations (2 Corinthians 11:23-27; 12:1-12). Paul chastised himself for mentioning those things, stating that he was speaking foolishly in doing so (2 Corinthians 11:21, 23). Yet as a representative of the Lord and as the one who had brought the gospel to the readers of the letter, Paul knew that he had an obligation to defend his own integrity and that of his message. If the Corinthian saints rejected Paul, the messenger who brought them the gospel, what would prevent them from rejecting the message as well? His fears appear to have been well-founded. Already they were being taught "another Jesus, whom we have not preached" (2 Corinthians 11:4), and among them were "false apostles,

deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Galatians (ca. A.D. 58)

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul responded to the problem of a movement within the church that countered his teachings with a Judaized Christianity and attacked him personally. It appears from the letter that the success rate of the anti-Pauline Judaizers was high, which caused Paul a great deal of concern. The false ideas that the Galatians were entertaining were of such a nature that without correction the gospel as taught by him would have been changed drastically. Paul accused the saints of turning to what he called "another gospel" under the influence of those who would "pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6-7). Among other things, he accused them of looking back to the Law of Moses for salvation (Galatians 3:1-5), observing Jewish holidays (Galatians 4:10), and accepting circumcision again (Galatians 5:2-4). So emphatic was he with regard to the apostolic authority of his message and its divine origin that he punctuated his rebuke by saying that even if an angel came from heaven teaching doctrine different than what he had taught, it should be rejected (Galatians 1:6-12)!

Paul clearly viewed the Galatian heresy with alarm. In his concerned effort to save the Galatians from even greater problems, he wrote the letter. We know nothing concerning its results. If during Paul's lifetime the Galatian churches had turned to "another gospel," to use his words, it is likely that they would have turned even farther afield without guidance and correction from men in the church such as Paul who could proclaim: "The gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

Colossians (ca. A.D. 61)

Colossians is the only one of the prison epistles in which Paul appears to be contending with a serious doctrinal problem. The nature of the problem, which is often called the "Colossian heresy," is not known precisely. Paul gave us only a few hints concerning it, and rather than dealing directly with the problem, he taught proper doctrine in an affirmative way—presumably in an effort to counterbalance falsehood with increased emphasis on truth. In the letter he wrote at great length concerning the role of Christ as the preeminent being in the universe, giving us one of the greatest statements found anywhere in sacred writings concerning the nature and mission of Jesus (Colossians 1:12-23; cf. 2:9-10). Paul's emphasis suggests that the so-called "Colossian heresy" included incorrect ideas concerning Jesus' standing among the powers of the heavens. In fact, Paul denounced the worship of others who had begun to be revered: "Do not be taken in by people who like groveling to angels and worshiping them; people like that are always going on about some vision they have had, inflating themselves to a false importance with their worldly outlook" (Colossians 2:18, JB).

Some commentators believe that Paul's reference to the worship of angels is evidence of elements of Gnosticism or something similar at Colossae. Gnosticism was a philosophy that may have had its roots outside of Christianity but which became part of various strands of the Christian faith early in its history.¹⁸ It had at its focus a belief that spirit was perfect and holy but that matter, and all that was created of it, was entirely evil. God, who was a being of pure spirit, could have nothing to do with man, a creature of matter (and therefore evil), so instead of worshiping God, Gnostics revered an extensive hierarchy of intermediary deities called aeons. It is not unlikely that Paul's prohibition against the worship of angels, something quite

unexpected otherwise in Christianity, was a reference to an aberrant belief akin to the worship of aeons.

One problem that Christian Gnostics faced was that of the nature of Jesus Christ. As Christ was believed to have been both God and man, having had a material body, his position in the heavenly hierarchies was problematic. Perhaps when Paul emphasized Christ's position in a cosmic perspective that was unprecedented in any other letter, the apostle was responding to this kind of ambivalence regarding the role of Jesus. Paul pointed out:

For in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17, RSV).

He stated further, "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily," and Jesus "is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:9-10). Paul's emphasis on Jesus' preeminence makes good sense in light of the Gnostic hierarchy of intermediary subdeities and the impossibility of fitting Jesus into the system.

The letter to the Colossians is a letter of urgent warning, and rightly so considering the perversion of doctrine to which the saints at Colossae had been exposed. Paul wrote that the blessings of Christ's atonement were available only if the saints were to "continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel" (Colossians 1:23). Further, "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught" (Colossians 2:6-7). Notice all of the vocabulary of permanence and stability that Paul used to admonish the saints to stay on the course of true doctrine: "grounded," "settled," "rooted," "built up," and "sta-

blished." Paul continued, "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" (Colossians 2:8).

If Gnosticism in some primitive form was indeed the heresy that was making inroads into the church at Colossae, then the church there was in a dangerous position. Gnostic beliefs were so antithetical to the doctrines of Jesus and the apostles that any attempt to merge or reconcile them could only lead to the ruin of the original faith. Extrabiblical sources tell us that Gnosticism played an important role in the first centuries of Christian history.¹⁹ Whereas the religion of the apostles did not continue, its gnosticized counterpart did.

1 Timothy and Titus (ca. A.D. 63)²⁰

The pastoral epistles give additional evidence that apostate doctrines were widespread in Christianity while Paul was still alive. Once again the main source of heretical teaching appears to have been Gnosticism. In 1 Timothy and Titus the evidence for a Gnostic perversion of Christianity is compelling.

The term "gnosticism" comes from the Greek noun *gnosis*, which means "knowledge." Gnostics were characterized by a belief that they had secret knowledge that had been passed on to them by Jesus or the apostles. They believed that it was through this *gnosis* that one was saved, by becoming able to rise above the evil physical world. That Paul was aware of Gnosticism and recognized it as a threat is evident in the final words of 1 Timothy: "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith" (1 Timothy 6:20-21, RSV, emphasis added).²¹

In 1 Timothy 1:3-4 Paul counseled Timothy to teach others to avoid "fables and endless genealogies." Similarly, he admonished Titus to speak out against "foolish questions, and genealogies" (Titus 3:9). We know that genealogy for worthy purposes was known among early Christians (see Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-28; Acts 4:36; Philippians 3:5). What Paul was referring to here was quite different, as he denounced it in the context of speculative doctrinal contention that was "unprofitable and vain" (1 Timothy 1:4; Titus 3:8-9). As stated previously, the Gnostic dualism of pure spirit on one extreme and evil matter on the other gave rise to an extensive hierarchy of subordinate deities. In a descending series beginning with the ultimate god, lower gods were begotten or created in turn until finally the lowest committed the ultimate evil act by creating the material world and man in it. In some second-century Gnostic systems, as contemporary accounts reveal, there were as many as 365 levels in this chain of heavens and divine beings.²² Paul's prohibition against "endless genealogies" seems to refer to this type of structure. Such diverting speculations do not edify in faith, he said, but "minister questions" (1 Timothy 1:4).²³

The pastoral epistles show other signs of the popularity of false doctrine in the church, not only of gentile origin but of Jewish origin as well. Paul warned Timothy of those who teach ideas other than the divine doctrine of the word of Jesus Christ. Those who do so are obsessed with "questions and strifes of words," out of which come "perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds" (1 Timothy 6:3-5; cf. 2 Timothy 2:23). He told Titus:

For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not. . . . Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and command-

ments of men, that turn from the truth (Titus 1:10-11, 13-14).

2 Timothy (ca. A.D. 67)

Paul's final letter, written to his beloved associate Timothy, is the product of the aged apostle as he awaited his execution in Rome. It was in this letter that Paul told of the good fight which he had fought and of the "crown of righteousness" which had been prepared for him (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Paul was an old man when the letter was written, at least by ancient standards, and he was concluding a career of service in the church that had lasted over thirty years. Now he was in chains, knowing that the time of his departure was near (2 Timothy 4:6).

In this pathetic setting Paul spoke of apostasy both future and present. In the future the saints would no longer "endure sound doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:3). But Paul knew that as he wrote, the process was already underway. He warned Timothy against "profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker" (2 Timothy 2:16-17). He mentioned two men guilty of spreading cancerous false doctrine, who had ruined the faith of some by teaching that the resurrection had already taken place.

Perhaps Paul's most sorrow-filled words are those found in 2 Timothy 1:15: "This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me." His choice of words is grim evidence that his work to establish the gospel of Christ in the hearts of his Asian converts was coming to naught. Paul had taught the gospel in Asia thirteen years earlier. The people had accepted it in large numbers (Acts 19:8-22). But now they were turning from him and from his message as well (see 2 Timothy 2:16-18, 23-26). Yet they were turning not back to their ancestral paganism, but to a new Christian paganism—one that had "a form of godliness" but denied "the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5; cf. also 4:3-4).

Jude (ca. A.D. 80)

By the time of the writing of Jude, the apostasy that had been prophesied was well underway. Jude tells us as much.

As he began his letter, Jude mentioned that it was necessary for him to write and exhort his readers that they "should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3). The impression one gets from Jude's urgent words is that "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" was facing substantial opposition. Jude explained why:

Certain people have infiltrated among you, and they are the ones you had a warning about, in writing, long ago, when they were condemned for denying all religion, turning the grace of our God into immorality, and rejecting our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4, JB, emphasis added).

This passage tells us both of the prophecy of the infiltration of godless men into the church and of its fulfillment. By this point in history the saints had received numerous prophecies that this kind of trouble would come in the last days of the church. Jude's words demonstrate that they knew it and that the time had arrived. His statement does not describe persecution or opposition from without, but apostasy from within, as "certain men crept in unawares" and gained influence to promote their false ideas.

Jude continued by likening the apostates of his day with several from more ancient times. Among other charges with which he condemned them was the fact that they "reject authority, and defame dignitaries" (Jude 1:8, Reicke), an overt act of rebellion similar to that described in 3 John.

Near the end of the letter Jude reminded the readers

again that they had been warned and that the day had arrived:

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit (Jude 1:17-19, NIV).

Revelation (ca. A.D. 96)

In John's apocalypse we find additional convincing evidence that apostasy was ruining the church. As had Jude before him, John told of the forces of rebellion already at work in Christianity. And, as he reported, they were succeeding.

The evidence of apostasy in progress is found in the messages to seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3. In those communications we can evaluate the spiritual stability of the churches based on the words addressed to each one. It is often suggested that the seven are representative of the church as a whole, given John's propensity for the use of numbers—particularly the number seven—in symbolic ways.²⁴ We have every reason to believe that the messages were actual communications to the seven churches, yet it is also possible that their words characterize all of Christianity and give us a reasonable evaluation of the faith as a whole near the end of the first century.

To Ephesus the message contained both congratulation and condemnation (Revelation 2:1-7). The Ephesians had been successful in rejecting false apostles and other apostate influences, yet they had fallen and succumbed to other evils to the extent that without immediate repentance they would be cast off by the Lord. Similarly the saints at Pergamos were instructed that if they did not repent the Lord would come against them (Revelation 2:12-17). They were guilty of false religion, characterized as "the doctrine of

Balaam," the Old Testament prophet who led Israel into apostate worship. To Thyatira the condemnation was of the same sort (Revelation 2:18-29). Though worthy of congratulation for good works, the saints there were guilty of allowing a heretical movement referred to by the name Jezebel to "seduce" the Lord's servants among them into apostate practice. Jezebel was proverbial of Old Testament fame for guiding Israel into the worship of false gods. Though challenged to repent before, those who had been seduced by the heresy had refused, leaving the Lord only the option of casting them off. Those who had not been tainted by the doctrine, who had "not known the depths of Satan," were commanded to "hold fast" to what they had. To Sardis the communication was somber: the church there was "ready to die" (Revelation 3:1-6). Only a few had not defiled themselves. If the rest did not repent, their names would be blotted out of "the book of life." Philadelphia received a more promising message (Revelation 3:7-13). It had a "little strength" left, and if it held fast, no one would take its crown.

The two remaining messages are those to Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11) and Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22). The saints in Smyrna were praised, and no faults were mentioned concerning the church. But a tragic fate awaited them. They would be imprisoned and suffer martyrdom. They were admonished not to fear what was coming and to be "faithful unto death." In so doing they would receive a "crown of life" and would "not be hurt of the second death." In contrast, the Lord's word to Laodicea was that the church there was spiritually "wretched," "miserable," "poor," "blind," and "naked." Because of its indifference to the things of God, he would spit it out of his mouth.

If the messages to the seven churches of Asia paint a fair picture of the overall status of early Christianity, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the prophecies of apostasy were then being fulfilled. Of the seven churches, only two

were not condemned, and one of those was to suffer martyrdom. One church was ready to die because of its sins; another was to be spit out of God's mouth. Of the rest, all were guilty of serious error, and each was told in strong terms that if it did not repent, it would be rejected.

1 and 2 John (ca. A.D. 98)

John's letters are probably the latest writings of the New Testament. As such they are the most informative source for the final days of the Christianity of the apostles. Predictably, the view that they provide of the church at the end of the century is a tragic one. John, who at this point certainly was the senior apostle of the church, told his readers that the last hours of the church had come, as prophesied, and that the powers of apostasy were among them in force. He stated:

Little children, *it is the last time*: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; *whereby we know that it is the last time* (1 John 2:18, emphasis added).²⁵

John and his readers knew that they were in the "last time" (*eschātē hora*, more literally "last hour") because they knew of prophecies that in the final days of the church "antichrist" would be found among them. Since "many antichrists" were then within the church, John knew with certainty that the final days had arrived.²⁶

In Paul's great prophecy in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, he foretold the manifestation of the "man of sin," Satan, in the period of apostasy. Paul's "man of sin" is the equivalent of John's "antichrist." Yet the fact that John mentioned many antichrists among the saints shows that it refers here not only to Satan singularly, but also to his followers, those who were inspired of him, and his entire movement. Continuing, John stated that the antichrists had come from among the saints: "They went out from us, but they were

not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us" (1 John 2:19).

Later in his letter, John warned his readers further about apostate influences among them: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). This passage contains three messages of importance to early Christians: (1) Do not believe every "spirit." John used the term "spirit" in a broad sense, possibly to mean something like "idea," "movement," "teacher," or "prophet." (2) Test those influences to see if they are from God. (3) "Many false prophets" were in the world. John clearly was writing about false prophets within Christianity. Recall that in his letter from Patmos to the Ephesians he made mention of false apostles who had been discovered and repelled (Revelation 2:2).

Next, John gave the means by which his readers could test the "spirits" to see if they were of God:

Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world (1 John 4:2-3).

The test was simple: if the spirit testified that Jesus had not come in the flesh, that was the anticipated spirit of antichrist.

Apparently John's readers had been influenced by *docetism*, a doctrine that denied that Christ had come in the flesh.²⁷ Docetism, from the Greek verb *dokéō*, "to seem," held that Christ had not really come in the flesh, but only appeared to do so. This belief was based on the Gnostic view that matter was evil, and that it would be impossible for a divine being such as Christ to be associated with it.

Docetism denied, therefore, the humanity of Christ, his physical suffering, his physical death, and his physical resurrection; he only seemed to have a physical body.

John's concern over this doctrinal development is understandable, considering the fact that he had been one of the closest individuals to Jesus during his mortality. To him such a belief was antichrist. In both 1 and 2 John he denounced it strongly (see 1 John 2:26; 2 John 1:7) and pleaded with the saints to hold fast to true doctrine: "Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father" (1 John 2:24).

3 John (ca. A.D. 98)

John's third letter is a letter of apostasy. In it he made reference to one Diotrephe, a local church leader who had refused to receive John. Diotrephe, according to John, "loveth to have the preeminence" among the saints (3 John 1:9). John—the presiding authority of the church—had written to him; but Diotrephe would not receive John. Neither would he receive "the brethren," and he would not let his congregation do so either. In fact, he excommunicated those who would (3 John 1:10).

This was apostasy by any definition. It was rebellion against divinely instituted authority. John promised to deal with the offending leader when he could, but if Diotrephe did not recognize John's authority, no doubt he would not have responded to his discipline either.

We have no way of knowing to what extent this type of rebellion characterized the Christian church at that time. Yet if, as we learn from John's other letters, rebellion against true doctrine was commonplace, undoubtedly the struggle against those who opposed that rebellion was equally widespread. The Diotrephe incident may have been one of many such events, as people of the rising third

generation of Christian history had no loyalty to John, the last remaining witness of the first. For those who rejected John, the final legitimate link of doctrinal and priesthood authority between Christ and the church that bore his name in that day was broken.

3. THE END OF THE APOSTOLIC ERA

The New Testament does not preserve for us a complete history of the Christian church of the first century A.D. We possess in addition to the gospels only the twenty-eight chapters of the book of Acts—much of which is not a history of the church but a history of the career of one apostle—and less than two dozen letters. These documents give us only a faint view of the seventy-year period which they span.²⁸ There are major gaps in our knowledge of the activities of the apostles, their lives, their teachings, and their deaths. We do know that in the early years following the resurrection of Jesus the apostles added additional members to their number as vacancies required. A good case for the fact that there had to be twelve apostles during the early period can be made on the basis of the choosing of Matthias to fill the position vacated by Judas Iscariot. It is significant to note that among the first things that the apostles did following the ascension of Jesus was to choose another to join them. As Peter explained, to fill Judas's place one had to "be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). Others are mentioned as well, who appear to have been added to the group of apostles in the following years. Although we lack the details of their choosing, ordination, or whom they replaced, we know that James (see Acts 12:17 and Acts 15; Galatians 1:19), Paul (Acts 14:14; Romans 1:1), and Barnabas (Acts 14:14; Romans 1:1) were added as time progressed. There may have been others concerning whom we have no information.

It is evident that James, Paul, and Barnabas were made apostles prior to A.D. 50. At least up until that point in

history it appears that the Lord perpetuated his system of apostolic succession in accordance with the precedent of the choosing of Matthias: when there was a vacancy in the Twelve, one was chosen to fill it. Later, however, it seems that the succession was ended. By A.D. 95 only John remained, as far as we know. The scriptural record is silent concerning others, but early Christian sources outside of the Bible show John as the only living apostle by the end of the century. When John left his public ministry, apostleship ceased in the church. Had it been God's will, others certainly could have been chosen. But clearly it was not. The Lord allowed the apostleship to die out.²⁹

When Jesus sent forth his special witnesses, he commanded them to bear testimony of him to all the world (e.g., Acts 1:8). They did this in two significant ways. First, they traveled far, preaching the gospel and bearing witness of Jesus and his work wherever they went. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, they left their testimony in the form of the records that we call collectively the New Testament. It is the written testimony of the apostles, preserved for all generations as the witness of those who were commissioned to be "witnesses unto [Christ] . . . unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The apostles were kept on earth long enough to fulfill the divine command. They did not fail.

The Lord knew, and he gave his apostles to know, that many saints would turn away from the true faith that had been taught to them. We have seen that it happened—slowly at first, but with increasing speed and irreversibility in each succeeding decade. And, as we have seen, with the rejection of true religion came the rejection of true authority as well. There must have come a time at some point near the year A.D. 100 when, had the apostolic succession continued, there would have been twelve apostles on earth and a church that rejected both their doctrine and their authority. This was not allowed to happen. It was

fortunate, in fact, that the system of succession was not perpetuated further. By the time of 3 John, ca. A.D. 98, even John, the senior apostle of the church, was being rejected. The Great Apostasy had come.

Notes

1. E.g., Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 5, 200 (Joseph Smith-History 1:18-19), 213; Oliver Cowdery, "Address," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 2; Orson Pratt, *A Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* (Edinburgh, 1840), 29; James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), and *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1960), 198-204.

2. It is an honor for me to include a discussion of the apostasy in a volume that celebrates the contributions of Hugh W. Nibley, whose writings contain numerous references to the fall of the Early Christian Church. Over the years he has demonstrated that the Latter-day Saint position on this matter is defensible by an appeal to the earliest Christian documents, including the New Testament itself. In his studies in early Christian history he has pointed out convincingly that the Christian church of the second century was not the same as that of the first. His major works specifically dealing with the apostasy include "The Passing of the Primitive Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme," and "The Way of the Church," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, vol. 4, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987), 168-208 and 209-322. The first of these is among Nibley's finest works. Additional discussion of the apostasy is found throughout his other writings, particularly in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* and in *The World and the Prophets*, vol. 3, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987).

3. For insights into the phrase, "they were all wrong," see Larry E. Dahl, "The Theological Significance of the First Vision," in Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, eds., *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 2: The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 326-27, 331-32.

4. All biblical quotations are from the King James Version unless indicated otherwise by the following abbreviations: JB—Jerusalem Bible; JST—Joseph Smith Translation; NIV—New International Version; Phillips—Phillips Modern English Version; REB—Revised Eng-

lish Bible; Reicke—Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964); RSV—Revised Standard Version.

5. The Greek verbal conjugation *enestēken*, translated “at hand” in the King James Bible, has been rendered in a variety of ways in other translations. The basic meaning of the word is “is present,” so perhaps the reading “has come” (RSV), or something similar to it as found in the majority of the versions, is more accurate than the ambiguous “at hand.” Albrecht Oepke, “*Enístemi*,” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:543-44.

6. Heinrich Schlier, “*Apostasia*,” in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:513-14; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 166. Richard D. Draper pointed out to me why he prefers to use the word “revolution” over “rebellion.” In a rebellion the rulers are challenged (and sometimes overthrown) but the state remains intact. In a successful revolution, not only are the leaders overthrown but the constitution is thrown out as well. The basic framework and objectives of the state are discarded in favor of new ones cast in the image of the new leaders. Stephen Robinson’s term “mutiny” carries the same connotation. When the captain of the ship is thrown overboard the new men at the helm steer a new course; see Stephen E. Robinson, “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13-14,” in Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 178. These scenarios describe accurately the ultimate result of the fall of early Christianity.

7. E.g., Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966-73), 3:63; Sidney B. Sperry, *Paul’s Life and Letters* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955; repr. 1987), 103.

8. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 86. See also William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 172-74.

9. See Robert E. Parsons, “The Great and Abominable Church,” in Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Studies in Scripture*, Vol. 7: *1 Nephi to Alma 29* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 54-59; Robinson, “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13-14,” 177-91.

10. See Dahl, “The Theological Significance of the First Vision,” 326-27, 331-32.

11. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 170-71; John W. Bailey, "2 Thessalonians, Exegesis," in George A. Buttrick et al., eds., *The Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1953-57), 11:328.
12. E.g., Bailey, "2 Thessalonians," 11:327.
13. For other insights, see Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 85-87.
14. See Hermann W. Beyer, "Blasphèmeō," in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:621-25.
15. Cf. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3:520-22.
16. See Robinson, "Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13-14," 188-90.
17. For additional New Testament evidence, see Nibley, "The Passing of the Primitive Church," 194-95, nn. 1-25.
18. An argument for Gnosticism in first-century (New Testament) Christianity is found in R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 31-84. For a popular introduction to Gnosticism in early Christianity, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); see also F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1972), 415-18.
19. E.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*; Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1-5, *Against the Valentinians*, *Prescription against Heretics*, *Scorpiace*. All of these are available in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979-81), vols. 1-3.
20. For excellent discussions concerning the dates of the Pastoral Epistles, see Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 310-14; D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954), 308-24. The dates accepted here necessarily presuppose both Pauline authorship and an early development of Gnosticism in first-century Christianity. Though most definitions or descriptions of Gnosticism reflect its second-century (and later) characteristics, it is not inaccurate to use the term with regard to the movements manifest in Colossians, the Pastoral Letters, and 1-2 John.
21. See Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 318-20.
22. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 24, 3-4.
23. See Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 320-21.
24. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Ramsay, The Seven Churches, and Early Christian Apostasy," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, 108 (1968): 1-4; J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 376.

25. Raymond E. Brown's translation reads as follows: "Children, it is the last hour. You heard that Antichrist is to come: well, now many Antichrists have made their appearance, and this makes us certain that it really is the last hour," *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 329.

26. Scholars generally believe that John had in mind the "last hour" (of whatever duration) before the return of Jesus. See Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 330-32; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 94-101. While it is not altogether clear how long the apostles anticipated the apostasy to last, this verse and those discussed above (particularly 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12) demonstrate that the coming of "antichrist" (or the "man of sin") was inevitable before Jesus' return. Assuming, as we must, that John realized that there would be a restoration before the Second Coming, the "last hour" can only point to the end of the church, not the end of the world (see Joseph Smith-Matthew 1:4). Thus Brown's suggestion that John "was wrong" misses the point; *The Epistles of John*, 330.

27. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 15-18, 104-5. For a brief survey of interpretations, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 14-22.

28. Nibley suggests that censorship and "the silent treatment" are two reasons why so little has survived from the earliest Christianity, showing examples from antiquity; "The Way of the Church," 223-31.

29. Note Nibley's insightful comment: "The failure of the apostles to leave behind them written instructions for the future guidance of the church has often been noted and sadly regretted. It is hard to conceive of such a colossal oversight if the founders had actually envisaged a long future for the church," Nibley, "The Passing of the Primitive Church," 176.