

Church History

by David Stewart

The Apostasy

About 2,000 years have passed since Christ established his church. Because of false teaching and division, the average person today has great difficulty recognizing the church that Jesus built. Many believe the fallacy that the Roman Catholic Church is the one Jesus established. If it were, I would want to be a part of it. However, we can see a drastic difference between that organization and the Christ-ordained church of Scripture. The Roman church may have evolved or apostatized from the first-century church, but the two are not the same.

The seeds of apostasy are evident even in the New Testament. Warning after warning appears to elders and evangelists alike to continue in the truth and to refute those who oppose it (Acts 20:28-31; 2 Timothy 4:1-5). In the second century, various sects rose up from divergent teaching: Gnostics, Marcionites, Montanists, Arians, and others. Gradually, the mainstream church apostatized also.

Some in the third-century church changed God's requirements in regard to salvation and church entrance. Salvation is by obedient faith, which includes immersion in water (Galatians 3:26, 27). The concern of Christian parents for their unbaptized infants and young children who were dying led to the practice of infant baptism. Later, the doctrine of Original Sin (inherited guilt) was developed to buttress the practice. However, in God's eyes, an infant is not a sinner, does not have the capacity for faith, and does not need baptism. The Roman church also allowed for sprinkling, while the Greek church (who understood the meaning of the word *baptisma*) preserved the biblical mode of immersion.

Both Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches gradually developed a hierarchal government. First-century churches had been independent, being led by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). They cooperated together and were under the influence of the apostles, yet they remained autonomous (see 2 Corinthians 8; 9). In the second century, a leading bishop began to emerge among the elderships in local congregations. More influential churches gained power over regions, and a few hundred years later the papacy was born in Rome. For the Greek Orthodox, a patriarch in Constantinople was given special honor. Those men claimed headship for the church, supplanting the authority of Christ (Ephesians 1:22, 23). Further, a complex system of subordinates, including a priesthood, was also initiated. However, the New Testament teaches that all Christians are priests holy to God (1 Peter 2:9).

Worship was also corrupted. In the Roman Catholic Church, "Mother Mary" was elevated almost to the point of being a fourth member of the Godhead. She was believed to be a "perpetual virgin," even though the New Testament tells us that Joseph had relations with her and that Jesus had brothers and sisters (Matthew 1:25; 12:46; 13:55, 56). Mary and the "saints"—redefined as

extraordinary Christians who had already died—became intercessors in prayer. However, there is “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

After several centuries, the Roman church began to use instruments in worship, although no authority from the New Testament exists for the practice. In contrast, the Greek church held on to “a cappella” (vocal) singing. The Latin term *a cappella* literally means “in the manner of the church.” Singing was the manner of worship in the first century, and it has continued to be practiced by the Greek Orthodox. Both groups, however, have engaged in ceremonialism (such as using candles and incense) to create an artificial mood in worship. Although similar practices are found in the Old Testament, they were only a “shadow” of the reality found in Christ (Hebrews 10:1).

The Roman church developed the radical teaching concerning the Lord’s Supper called “Transubstantiation”—the belief that the bread and wine actually become the flesh and blood of Christ. In the “Mass,” each week the priest supposedly sacrifices Christ. In the New Testament, however, communion is a memorial and a proclamation (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:26). Christ died once for all, never to die again (Hebrews 9:25-28)!

In both Greek and Roman churches, pictures were originally used for teaching purposes to illustrate a story. There was great debate whether or not one could use 2D images (icons) or 3D images (statues). The point is moot because both icons and statues came to be used as mediums for worship, which is idolatry.

Both Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics shared in the monastic movement. People who were “devoted” would totally separate themselves from the world and live the contemplative life. This concept originated with hermits, but its popularity gave way to communal living. This living arrangement is diametrically opposed to Jesus’ calling: “You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13, 14; see John 17:15).

Roman Catholics developed a teaching called “penance” whereby a church member could earn forgiveness. Different actions would be prescribed by the priest for the confessor to carry out, so he could win back God’s favor. This undermined the simplicity of confessing those sins to God in repentance and trusting his power to forgive (1 John 1:9). For a price, Catholics could also pay money for their sins or purchase their loved ones’ salvation from “purgatory”—an intermediate state between heaven and hell (that has no basis in the inspired Word). It was the selling of those “indulgences” that was the last straw for the Catholic priest Martin Luther. His dissent, and that of others, brought about the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation

Martin Luther, a Catholic priest in Germany, fueled the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s with his outcry against some of the false teachings and practices of the Catholic church. He rightly

opposed “works-salvation,” which included doing penance and purchasing indulgences. However, Luther overreacted by developing the “faith only” position commonly held by Protestants today. He did not care much for the Book of James, which tells us that “a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (James 2:24).

Luther wanted to get away from many of the trappings found in Catholicism, but his interpretive method led right back in that direction. He believed that if the Bible did not condemn a practice, then it was permissible. As history has proven, this is a dangerous and divisive way of understanding Scripture. Most denominations have adopted this interpretive method, which leads to unending presumption as to what should be practiced. Interestingly, Luther did *not* want those in sympathy with his beliefs to call themselves by his name, “Lutherans.”

Another key figure in the Protestant Reformation was John Calvin of Switzerland. Calvin championed the false teaching known today by the acrostic TULIP.

T = Total Hereditary Depravity: the belief that we inherit the guilt of Adam’s sin. This teaching denies personal responsibility and condemns every infant before reaching a point of accountability.

U = Unconditional Election: the idea that God has predestined individuals to be saved. Man ultimately has no choice in the matter.

L = Limited Atonement: the teaching that Jesus died only for those who are predestined to be saved—“the elect.”

I = Irresistible Grace: the idea that man is so sinful that God must directly operate on him by the Holy Spirit to bring about his salvation.

P = Perseverance of the Saints: the belief that a person can never fall from grace—“once saved always saved.”

Calvin’s system of teaching, which was foundational for many Protestant churches, contradicts that of the Bible.

- (1) Scripture teaches us that we are *personally accountable* for what we have done. We will not give an account for Adam or anyone else but ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:10).
- (2) God has not predestined individuals to be saved, but has predetermined that the salvation of individuals would come *through Christ* (Ephesians 1:3-14).
- (3) Jesus died to give *the whole world* an opportunity to be saved (John 3:16). God does not want “anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).
- (4) God does not beam salvation into us through the Holy Spirit. Rather, faith comes by *hearing* the message, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; Romans 10:17). Man has a definite choice of accepting or rejecting Christ (John 3:36).
- (5) The possibility of falling from God’s grace is repeatedly warned against in the New Testament. We must *remain* faithful to Christ (Revelation 2; 3)!

Although the Protestant Reformation was the nesting ground for religious division and the many modern denominations of our time, there were some positive things that came out of it. Scripture, which had been chained by the Catholic clergy, was translated and copied into the languages of the common man. Even though the Bible was often misunderstood, the emphasis had shifted from church authority back to biblical authority. These elements would be necessary ingredients for the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

The Restoration

In the early 1800s, the spark of restoration burst into full flame. People realized that “reforming” the Catholic church was not enough; there must be a “restoration” of Jesus’ church. God used the mass printing of the Bible and the rise of American freedom to help fuel this movement. People were free to read God’s Word and to put into practice what they read because there was no state church in America to oppose them. Several fundamental issues had to be addressed in order for true restoration to occur.

1) *Unity*. Many good-hearted people were frustrated with denominational division. There were so many different religious bodies with a host of diverse teachings. This divisiveness was disheartening in light of the Lord’s prayer “that all of them may be one” (John 17:21). Unlike those who celebrate doctrinal diversity today, these pioneers realized that division is sin. There was a great urgency for unity among all true Christians—a unity based on truth. They were seeking to obey Paul’s admonition that “all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

2) *Name*. These restorationists realized that the various denominational names were divisive and of human origin. They wanted to get back to the divine name given to those who follow Christ—that is, the name “Christian” (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). They just wanted to be the church of Christ (Matthew 16:18; Romans 16:16).

3) *Bible Authority*. Creeds and confessions written by men were a fundamental part of denominationalism. Each religious body had its own written beliefs. Those seeking restoration traded these dogmas for the sole authority of Scripture. The “do not add or take away” principle was taken seriously (Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18, 19).

4) *Organization*. Each religious body had a different ruling structure unique to that particular group. Yet, the Bible had only revealed one structure. “God placed all things under [Jesus’] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body” (Ephesians 1:22, 23). Although cooperating together, each developed congregation had its own eldership in the New Testament (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5). The pioneers rejected human heads and organized themselves into independent congregations with local church elderships.

5) *Believer’s Baptism*. With a great emphasis on the Bible and restoring New Testament Christianity, the question of salvation naturally arose. Who is a Christian? How does one become

a child of God, and how does he enter Christ's church? After thorough examination of the Bible, the pioneers realized that lost sinners had believed the good news of Christ, had turned from sin, and had been immersed in water to have their sins washed away (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21). At that time, they were added by Christ to his church (Acts 2:41; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

6) *Worship*. Those wishing to restore the Lord's church abandoned practices that had no biblical authority. They shunned the ceremonialism prominent in Catholicism. They also removed the Protestant "mourner's bench" and simply told people what they must do to be saved. They rejected the use of instrumental music, which had no place in first-century worship. They put back in its proper place the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day. It was their desire to worship God with all of their hearts according to the truth revealed in Scripture.

7) *Evangelism*. A great burden was on their hearts to reach the lost. They started several journals both to edify Christians and to convert the lost. Debates were held to clear the air on important (but often misunderstood) topics. Evangelists rode horseback from place to place through all extremes of weather to preach the Word. They had a great passion for Christ and his church. Are we passionate about restoring New Testament Christianity today?

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