

THE LAST DAYS' APOSTASY OF THE CHURCH – PART V

by Andy Woods

Apostasy is an important yet often neglected subject when attempting to comprehend what the Bible teaches about the end times. Thus, this series of articles is dedicated toward tracing ten general, biblical characteristics of apostasy. In the previous articles, apostasy was defined as a movement within Christ's church representing a departure from known truth. It was also established that apostasy is the central sign revealed in Scripture signaling the near completion of the church's earthly mission, that warnings against apostasy consume much of the New Testament, and that these New Testament warnings relate to virtually all of Christianity's most cherished doctrines. Apostasy is also a phenomenon that occurs internally within the church, is led by individuals considered the least likely candidates to depart from truth, can happen quickly, and is ultimately satanically energized. Moreover, apostasy is destructive in character and also has a deleterious impact upon those within the church who are attempting to remain faithful to God's truth. The last two articles in this series will discuss a final characteristic of apostasy: apostasy negatively impacts those who have not taken preventive measures against it. This final characteristic is perhaps the most important to discuss since it explains what believers can do to insulate themselves from apostasy's pernicious influence.

The Need for Aggressive Action

As the various characteristics of apostasy have been noted throughout this series, what has been depicted is a strong downstream current. This mighty downstream current of apostasy influences all Christians, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Although some are more conscious of the ever-present "tug" of apostasy than others, the reality is that the chronic "pull" influences all believers. Picture yourself in the midst of a

river being dragged along by a downstream current. Suppose that you do not want to be pulled downstream. What do you do? If you do nothing and remain passive you will continue to be pulled in a direction you do not want to go. The only way to reverse your predicament is to do something active or aggressive. For example, assuming the river is shallow enough, you might attempt to brace your feet on the bottom of the river in order to counteract the river's natural downstream direction. You could also paddle upstream or toward the shoreline. You could even call out for help. The only real unacceptable option is remaining passive. Passivity is a sure guarantee that you will be taken in the direction you do not want to go.

While we all understand this imagery in the context of the natural world, the same imagery is equally applicable in the spiritual world. Remaining passive is a sure way to succumb to apostasy's negative influence. What aggressive action must be taken in order to find insulation and protection from apostasy's constant influence? The answer to this question is really quite simple. Upon encountering a New Testament command exhorting the believer to do something, we simply obey the command. The New Testament is littered with such commands. As these imperatives become more than words on a page to us but rather things that we incorporate into daily life, we soon discover that the influence that apostasy once had over us begins to wane.

Many of these biblical injunctions amount to simple preventive maintenance. We all understand that over the long run it is easier and less expensive to take our automobiles in for regular mechanical check ups in order to prevent a break down from occurring rather than taking the car in after it has already broken down. As the saying goes, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." In other words, being proactive in order to prevent something bad from happening is better than reacting to a bad situation after it has already transpired. As Proverbs 27:12 puts it, "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself; the simple pass on and are punished." As we regularly obey a host of New Testament commands, we discover that we can actually prevent

apostasy from occurring, which is better than making a difficult “up hill climb” back to divine truth after we have already apostatized. Similarly, by implementing a variety of New Testament commands, we can prevent apostasy from even occurring in our personal lives.

Test All Things

One such command is, “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). How do believers “test all things”? One of the greatest gifts given to us by God is a reliable standard of divine truth through the closed canon of Scripture. The Holy Spirit, who authored the Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21), is not schizophrenic. It is impossible for the Holy Spirit to say one thing at one time and something contradictory another time. In other words, it is an impossibility for the Holy Spirit to reveal something in Scripture and then something entirely different through a human teacher, prophet, theologian, doctrine, philosophy, etc... Thus, believers can protect themselves from the apostasy that is so prevalent in our day by simply comparing everything we hear with the eternal Word of God. Those items taught to us that are consistent with what God has already revealed in Scripture are to be accepted and embraced while those things that are inconsistent with scriptural truth are to be rejected and discarded.

Of course, the command to “test all things” in this manner is replete throughout the Bible. This exhortation is as old as 1405 B.C. when Moses on the plains of Moab exhorted the Jews who were on the verge of entering Canaan not to believe every prophet. He explained, “If there arises among you a prophet or dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet...” (Deut 13:1-3). Here, Moses explains that the test of truth is not an experience or even a miraculous manifestation from a prophet who “arises among you.” Rather, truth is determined by whether the

prophet's message is in conformity with prior divine revelation. In this case it is not since the prophet's exhortation to "go after other gods" contradicts the first two commandments in the previously revealed Decalogue (Exod 20:1-6; Deut 5:6-10). These verses are especially important for today's experientially based Christianity, which is prone to attach divine authority to a message based upon a subject experience, a miraculous manifestation,¹ or even the giftedness of the presenter. Paul taught the same principle in the New Testament when he told the Galatians, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). Notice that Paul explained that divine authority should not be ascribed to a teaching made either by him or any other apostle or even an angel² if such a teaching contradicted what prior revelation taught concerning the gospel.

Moreover, the Scripture commends the Bereans for testing all things. Acts 17:11 says of them, "These were more fair minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." Apparently, the Bereans understood the principle of testing all self-proclaimed sources of truth by prior revelation. They even, to their credit, put Paul himself to the test on a daily basis. Christ similarly commended the Ephesians for following the same practice of testing all things. He said of them, "And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). Although Christ later criticized the Ephesian Christians, He commended them for their unwillingness to accept something as true simply because it claimed to have come from

¹ How can these false prophets perform miracles if they are not in a right relationship with God? Satan is also in the miracle working business as many sections of Scripture amply testify (Exod. 7-8; Matt. 7:21-23; 24:24; Acts 8:9; 16:16; 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13:3, 13, 15; 16:13-14; 19:20).

² Interestingly, many false religions that are prevalent today got their start from someone allegedly receiving a communication from an angel. Such an angelic manifestation, in and of itself, should not be mistaken for divine truth since Satan can also appear as an attractive angel (2 Cor. 11:14; Isa. 14:12-13; Ezek. 28:14).

an apostolic source. He praised them for their diligence in testing all things through the light of prior revelation. John similarly sought to insulate his readers from encroaching Gnosticism by also teaching them to test all things by prior divine revelation. He explained, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

However, the believer only has an ability to test all things to the extent that he is familiar with what God has already revealed in the scriptural record. The way those in the banking industry are trained to recognize counterfeit currency is not by studying counterfeit currency. Rather, they become familiar with texture, color, and even the smell of genuine currency. Thus, when false currency comes across their hand they can immediately recognize it as false since their familiarity with the real currency gives them a frame of reference to compare the false to, thereby enabling them to recognize its falsity. In other words, lack of familiarity with the real leads to an inability to recognize the false. Similarly, scriptural illiteracy prevents Christians from being able to discern truth from error consequently making them vulnerable to apostasy. Thus, the author of Hebrews views the capacity for spiritual discernment emanating from familiarity with Scripture as a sign of spiritual maturity. Hebrews 5:14 notes, “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” In sum, passivity makes resisting apostasy impossible. Rather, the capacity to resist the natural flow of apostasy only becomes viable to the extent that the believer actively familiarizes himself with Scripture and actively compares every teaching he receives with this prior divine revelation.

(To Be Continued...)