

# Denominationalism, Religious Cults and World Religions

## Lesson 2

### The Period of Apostasy

#### Introduction:

During the first century the Lord's church faced a number of threats from false teachers and their doctrines. Among the earliest threats confronting the church were the philosophies of *Asceticism* and *Gnosticism*.

Asceticism involved depriving oneself of anything pleasurable out of a desire to glorify God – thus avoiding what was considered to be either physically or spiritually harmful, and thereby limiting oneself to only what was necessary to sustain life. The apostle Paul referred to this false teaching in his letters to the church at Colossae and to the evangelist Timothy (Col 2:20-23; 1 Tim 4:1-3).

Gnosticism, which comes from the Greek word "gnosis" (knowledge), was a philosophy that claimed to have discovered a true "inner knowledge" that gave its adherents a superior understanding of spiritual truths. However, this philosophy denied many of the fundamental truths of Christianity, including the incarnation and deity of Jesus Christ (Christ in bodily form), as well as denying His bodily resurrection from the dead.

The apostles Paul and John confronted this growing threat in many of their letters. Paul clearly asserted the deity of Jesus Christ – that He was God in the flesh, and that He had been bodily resurrected from the dead. (Col 2:8-9; Phil 2:5-11; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Cor 15:14-19). John likewise affirmed the deity of Jesus Christ, affirming He had come in the flesh. (John 1:1-4, 14; 20:30-31; 1 John 2:22; 4:2-3; 2 John 7-8).

However, these were not the only threats facing the church of the first century. The apostle Paul repeatedly warned of a general "apostasy" or "falling away" from the truth. This apostasy would occur within the Lord's church and would affect matters of faith and practice. (Acts 20:28-30). The church would not only face an assault of false teachers from without, men would rise up from within "*speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.*" Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders that "*from among yourselves men will rise up*" meant false teachers may even come from among the spiritual shepherds of the church – elders or bishops. The history of the Lord's church from the second through sixth centuries would prove Paul's statement true.

The apostle Paul also issued a similar warning to the church in Thessalonica. (2 Thess 2:3-4). Some commentators suggest the terms "man of sin" or "son of perdition" were simply figures of speech describing anyone who turned away from Jesus Christ to sin and utter destruction. For example, Jesus described Judas as "the son of perdition." (John 17:12). Others suggest Paul was prophetically speaking of one particular man *"who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."* Over the years theologians and commentators have offered a wide range of speculations as to whom Paul meant – from the Caesars (especially those who demanded worship) to modern world dictators. Others have suggested Paul was referring to a world religious leader such as the Pope of Rome or perhaps even Mohammad.

Whether the apostle was using figures of speech or speaking about a single man, the fact remained that a time would come when many will no longer *"endure sound doctrine"* but will *"turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."* (2 Tim 4:1-4).

The apostle John gave a similar warning to Christians during the latter part of the first century. (1 John 2:18).

## **I. The growth of apostasy in the Lord's church.**

### **A. The second century AD:**

1. The beginning of creeds.
  - a. To defend the faith against false teachers and their heresies many sought to define a standard rule of faith and practice among Christians.
  - b. This would result in the formation of creeds which would later be used as tests of fellowship.
2. The Biblical organization of the church changed.
  - a. First came the emergence of one bishop as the head of a local congregation, with presbyters (elders) and deacons serving under his jurisdiction (first advocated by Ignatius, d. 108 AD).
    - (1). "Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the

beginning and is at last made manifest" – Ignatius: *Letter to the Magnesians* 2, 6:1

- b. Although at this time the bishop's authority did not extend beyond the city where he served, this pattern for the local church continued throughout the second century.
  3. The term "Catholic Church" (universal church) is first used by Ignatius (d. 108 AD) to describe the collective of all Christian congregations.
    - a. By the latter part of the second century the term "Holy Catholic Church" was used to describe only "orthodox churches" (mainstream or traditional churches) as opposed to "heretical churches."
  4. The rise of councils.
    - a. Bishops would meet with their presbyters (elders) to decide questions affecting the churches under his jurisdiction.
    - b. When doctrinal disputes arose between bishops, councils of bishops met to deal with the problems.
    - c. These councils (synods) became commonplace during the latter second century.
  5. Church in Rome claimed to be the leading church.
    - a. By the end of the second century, the church at Rome was beginning to assert itself as the leading church because of its past association with the apostles Paul and Peter.
- B. The third century AD:
  1. Renewed persecution against Christians by Emperors Septimius Severus (146-211 AD) and Trajan Decius (201-251 AD).
    - a. In an effort by the emperors to unify the Roman Empire under one religion, Christians became the target of renewed persecutions. The church was seen as "an empire in the empire."
    - b. Severus attempted to stop the spread of Christianity by outlawing conversions to Christianity.

- c. Decius revived the practice of mandatory sacrifices to show ones allegiance to Rome (Emperor worship).
    - d. Those who refused to offer sacrifices to the Emperor and to Rome were tortured and executed.
  - 2. Martyrs venerated as "saints."
    - a. Cults began to appear as early as the third century in which martyrs were worshipped as "saints" – despite the fact that the term "saints" was always used to refer to every Christian.
- C. The fourth century AD:
  - 1. Constantine the Great.
    - a. The rise of Constantine the Great, and his subsequent "conversion" in 312 AD, brought an end to persecution. He consolidated his power as sole ruler of the Roman Empire.
    - b. He founded a new capital in the city of Byzantium in 330 AD, which he named Constantinople (modern Istanbul).
    - c. During his reign as Emperor the power of the church shifted from Rome to Constantinople (from the Western Church to the Eastern Church).
  - 2. Council of Nicaea and the Nicæan creed.
    - a. Constantine gathered all bishops in the city of Nicaea (325 AD) to formulate a creed that would clearly and concisely state the fundamental beliefs of Christians.
    - b. The primary purpose of this creed was to answer the heresies of Arias of Alexander who denied the nature of the Godhead and the deity of Jesus Christ, and further denied the Holy Spirit as being a third person in the Godhead (modern Jehovah's Witness theology holds to many of the basic tenants of Arianism).
  - 3. Distinction between clergy and laity.
    - a. During the fourth century the differentiation between the clergy and the laity became more pronounced.

- b. By the fourth and fifth centuries the clergy began wearing special clothes (long tunics and cloaks) – at first only during worship, but eventually all the time to distinguish them from the laity.
4. The growth of dioceses or districts and the rise of the metropolitan (or mother) church.
  - a. Churches and their bishops were grouped together into dioceses or districts under the oversight of the metropolitan or mother church.
  - b. Eventually one bishop would be appointed as "the metropolitan" or patriarch.
  - c. Bishops were required to come together twice a year under the oversight of their respective patriarch.
5. The period of the "Five Patriarchs."
  - a. Five patriarchs ruled the church from within their respective territories (Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem).
  - b. Rome and Constantinople were seen as near equals, with Rome having the highest honors because of its past association with the apostles Peter and Paul.
6. Changes in the Lord's Supper
  - a. Gradual changes in the Lord's Supper began as early as the second and third centuries.
  - b. By the late fourth century baptism and the Lord's Supper ("Sacraments") had taken on a greater formality and elaborate symbolism.
  - c. Some bishops departed from viewing the unleavened bread and fruit of the vine as "symbols," and began to speak of a change occurring in these elements to literally become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Thus began the doctrine of "transubstantiation" which was the elaborate theory of how this change occurs.
  - d. "Closed communion" was widely practiced by the fourth century. It was closed to all but the most pious and most faithful.

7. Changes in baptism.
    - a. No longer was anyone allowed to witness the "mysteries" of baptism or the Lord's Supper until the time of "initiation."
    - b. Those wishing to be baptized submitted their name shortly after the beginning of the new year, followed by instruction in the Christian faith (based primarily on creeds), but were not baptized until Easter Sunday.
    - c. Each baptized candidate was also anointed with oil to symbolize the anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit at His baptism.
    - d. Infant baptism also became increasingly practiced during this time.
  8. Private confessions to the clergy.
    - a. In addition to private confessions of sins to a clergyman, an elaborate and lengthy process of public confession of sins and penitence was instituted for those who had committed sin.
    - b. Although penitence varied based on the seriousness of the sins, ultimately the bishop decided the amount of penitence required.
  9. The terms "Catholic Christians" and "Catholic Church" were officially adopted.
    - a. Emperor Theodosius (380 AD) declared "Catholic Christianity" the state religion of the Roman Empire.
- D. The fifth century AD:
1. Rise of two leading Patriarchs.
    - a. The patriarch of Rome in the west and the patriarch of Constantinople in the east were eventually seen as the leading patriarch among the other three (Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem).
    - b. However, neither Rome or Constantinople claimed universal authority.
  2. Rise of celibacy and monastic lifestyle among the clergy.
    - a. By the fifth century the clergy began to practice celibacy and began monastic-style living, taking vows of poverty based on the sayings

of Jesus, such as "sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21).

3. Changes in the appointment of bishops.
    - a. Initially, bishops were elected by the people.
    - b. Over time, the clergy began to wield more influence in selecting bishops, as well as the inclusion of neighboring bishops in the selection process.
    - c. The place of the laity came to be reduced to a minimum.
  4. Burial places of martyred "saints" become holy shrines.
    - a. Church buildings were erected on those burial sites, and the church dedicated to that particular "saint."
    - b. Relics of the martyrs (which sometimes included body parts or objects once owned by the martyr) also became popular and were believed to have power over demons and to bring healing.
- E. The sixth century AD:
1. The birth of the papacy.
    - a. The word "pope," derived from the Latin "pappas" (papa), is simply translated "father." This title was assumed by the patriarchs of Alexandria, Egypt long before the patriarchs (bishops) in Rome.
    - b. It is difficult to identify the first bishop of Rome to carry the title Pope of Rome.
      - (1). Some suggest it was as early as Marcellinus (d. 304 AD), while others suggest this did not occur until the 6th century, with John I (c. 523–526 AD) being the first to assume this title. Still others claim the title "Pope" or "Universal Bishop" was first claimed by Boniface III (606 AD).
  2. The title "Pope" began to be confined in the Western church to the Bishop of Rome.
    - a. The practice of designating the Bishop of Rome "Pope" was firmly in place by the 11th century, when Pope Gregory VII declared it reserved exclusively for the Bishop of Rome.

- b. Bishops of Rome were eventually given the most blasphemous Latin titles such as:
  - (1). *Dominus Deus noster papa* (Our Lord God the pope).
  - (2). *Deus alter in terrâ* (Another God on earth).
  - (3). *Idem est dominium Dei et papae* (The dominion of God and the pope is the same).
3. The Eastern Byzantine (Orthodox) church continued using the title of "Patriarch."
  - a. Despite the Bishops of Rome claiming universal rule over the western church, the eastern church continued in the tradition of the period of the Five Patriarchs (451-588 AD).
  - b. Unlike Rome which claimed absolute power and rule over the western church, Constantinople called itself "the first among equals," and does so to the present time.
  - c. With the rise of Islam and the Muslim conquest of 622 AD throughout the eastern Mediterranean, the Patriarch rule of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem eventually came to an end.
  - d. This left only two dominant powers which ruled the church during this time – Rome in the west and Constantinople in the east.
  - e. When Constantinople fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks the power of the Orthodox Church temporarily shifted west to Greece. However, Constantinople (Istanbul) once again became the seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1600, and remains so to this day.

### **Conclusion:**

- I. **The apostasy of the first six centuries resulted in the emergence of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Catholic churches.**
  - A. Both are the result of men who were unwilling to "*endure sound doctrine*" but chose instead to "*turn their ears away from the truth.*" (2 Timothy 4:1-4).
    1. Once apostasy began it inevitably led to the birth of false religion.
      - a. This was certainly true in the case of the birth of Catholicism.



- b. Religious leaders during the first six centuries demanded the unsuspecting and Biblically ignorant masses accept their false teaching upon pain of being labeled as heretics and suffering punishment and death.
2. This apostasy also fostered men who spoke *"perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."* (Acts 20:28-30).
  - a. Power struggles between men of a corrupt and depraved nature were common during the first six centuries (and beyond). Religion and politics became so intricately entwined that one could not exist without the other.
  - b. The apostle Paul warned: *"But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."* (2 Timothy 3:13).
3. However, the gross abuses of power within the Catholic church eventually caused a backlash that led to the Protestant Reformation.
4. Unfortunately, the Protestant Reformation gave rise to a second wave of apostasy and the teachings of doctrines of men which led to the rise of religious denominations.

**Study Questions:**

1. What New Testament teachings (cite specific passages) are violated by the following:
  - a. Human creeds.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. One bishop appointed as head of a local congregation with presbyters (elders and deacons serving under his jurisdiction.

- c. Doctrinal disputes settled by councils of bishops.
- d. Calling only martyrs "saints."
- e. Distinction between clergy and laity.
- f. Bishops overseeing several congregations.
- g. The doctrine of "transubstantiation."
- h. Baptisms administered only at specific times of the year.

- i. Infant baptism.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- j. Confession of sins to the clergy.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- k. The practice of celibacy and poverty among the clergy.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- l. Bishops appointing bishops.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- m. The worship of objects and relics.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- n. A man declared as universal bishop of the church (pope).

2. Two of the first steps toward apostasy were the formation of human creeds and changes in the organization of the New Testament church. Explain how these first steps contributed to further apostasy?
  - a. The formation of human creeds:
    - b. Changes in the organization of the church:
  
3. Explain why the following titles given to the pope are heresy:
  - a. *Dominus Deus noster papa* (Our Lord God the pope).
  
  - b. *Deus alter in terrâ* (Another God on earth).
  
  - c. *Idem est dominium Dei et papae* (The dominion of God and the pope is the same).