

Apostasy in the Last Days

Dr. Thomas M. Strouse

Introduction

Occasionally a preacher will say something like “we must be in the last days because of the increase in apostasy all around,” citing II Tim. 3:1 ff. as his proof text. Sometimes one of the recorded sins will be singled out and expounded as a “sign” of the Rapture.¹ For instance, the obvious observation about the narcissistic American society which evidences the egotistic sin of “*lovers of their own selves*,” justifies saying, “surely this must be a sign of the Second Advent.” Many preachers and teachers, even those claiming to hold to the imminent coming of Christ, posit the fallacious notion that “the last days” started in the nineteenth century and extend into the twenty-first century. There are several biblical reasons for rejecting the position that “the last days” refer to a period starting sometime *after* the Apostolic Age, and therefore are signs of the Rapture.

First, prophecy must be pertinent to the original audience. Paul wrote to Timothy so that he would know what to expect later in his lifetime during the Apostolic Age. Second, the Scripture is very clear when the last times (days) began, as the Apostle John revealed, saying, “*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*” (I Jn. 2:18). The last days relate to the fulfillment of Jacob’s prophecy which included the coming of Shiloh (Gen. 49:1, 10).² The last times began when the Messiah/King came with His proposed kingdom (Mt. 3:2; 4:17). Peter recognized that the last days had begun with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, saying, “*But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in **the last days**, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams*” (Acts 2:16-17). Paul revealed that the last days began with the Lord Jesus Christ’s words which were ultimately inscripturated in the Apostolic Age, saying, “*Hath in **these last days** spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds*” (Heb. 1:2). James addressed his audience as sinning in the last days, saying, “*Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the **last days***” (Jam. 5:3).

Third, the opinion that the last days began sometime after the Apostolic Age is based on the “Church-Age” heresy that the Ἀποκάλυψις teaches that there will be “Seven Church Ages” spread out over two thousand years of Christendom. This position is Protestant in origin and was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible. The Lord Jesus Christ revealed to the seven churches in Asia Minor the coming events of prophecy (cf. Rev. 1:4, 20). Although these churches are representative of NT assemblies anywhere and at anytime, they do not represent the so-called “Church Ages” of the Universal Church, including Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Although many Baptist preachers speak of living in the “Laodicean Church Age,” they should know that this is theological bunk. Organizing the “Church Ages” around arbitrary Catholic and Protestant historical events is theologically disastrous, ecclesiologically deceptive, and extremely subjective. The Apostle Paul did *not* teach Timothy that sometime in the far future when the Laodicean Church Age would finally arrive, the Last Days would begin and End Time Apostasy would signal the signs of the Rapture. Those Baptists who teach this ecclesiological and eschatological heresy are guilty of promoting Protestant theology and Romish/Protestant “church history” in Baptist garb, and undermine the very doctrine of the imminent return of Christ.³

¹Paul did not look for signs but for the Saviour, saying, “*For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Phil. 3:20).

²One should note also the other two OT references to “the last days” relate to the coming of Christ (Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1), and from the OT prophetic perspective, there would be “one” coming.

³When challenged by this author about the imminency doctrine, one Baptist stated that the “Church Ages” could be very short and all occur within the Apostolic Age. But then the retort is “why call them ‘ages.’”

Proponents of this heresy are Protestant preachers, such as Theodore Epp, who states concerning Rev. 2-3, saying, “If I were to give a title to this section I would call it ‘the Great Apostasy of the Last Days Traced from the Beginning of the Church’s History’...it [apostasy] began early in church history and will be consummated in the world after the true Church is gone. The decline in faith can be traced through these seven churches with the climax in the great apostate church of Revelation 17.”⁴ Harry Ironsides affirmed concerning the Philadelphia “Church Age,” saying, “Following the Reformation came a time when a cold, lifeless formalism seemed to settle over all Protestant Christendom...but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a great wave of blessing came over all of those lands where the Reformation had gone...Marvelous awakenings [Protestant] occurred...”⁵ J. A. Seiss averred, saying, “Can any man scrutinize narrowly the professed Church of our day, and say that we have not reached the Laodicean age?”⁶ Biblical Baptists do not interpret “church” in any sense to include Catholicism or Protestantism. Nor do Biblical Baptists recognize that the history of Catholicism or Protestantism is the legitimate Christian history of the Lord’s churches.

Interpretation

The Apostle Paul did indeed warn Timothy of the coming apostasy in the Apostolic Age. He revealed that apostasy would increase (v. 13), enumerating sins of mankind that would run their full course. The perilous times would include seasons of difficulties within the last days, where the intensity of the following sins would be manifest. His litany of evils included “*lovers of their own selves*” (οἱ ἄνθρωποι φίλαυτοι) or a “me first” society,⁷ “*covetous*” (φιλάργυροι) or those loving materialism,⁸ “*boasters*” (ἀλαζόνες) or pretenders, “*proud*” (ὑπερήφανοι) or haughty,⁹ “*blasphemers*” (βλάσφημοι) or slanders, “*disobedient to parents*” (γονεῦσιν ἀπειθεῖς) or young rebels,¹⁰ “*unthankful*” (ἀχάριστοι) or ingrates, “*unholy*” (ἀνόσιοι) or impious, “*without natural affection*” (ἄστοργοι) or having no natural familial love, “*trucebreakers*” (ἄσπονδοι) or contract breakers, “*false accusers*” (διάβολοι) or diabolical, “*incontinent*” (ἀκρατεῖς) or without self-control,¹¹ “*fierce*” (ἀνήμεροι) or savage,¹² “*despisers of those that are good*” (ἀφιλάγαθοι) or anti-good men, “*traitors*” (προδόται) or willing to betray, “*heady*” (προπετεῖς) or reckless, “*highminded*” (τετυφωμένοι) or puffed up, and “*lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God*” (φιλήδονοι μᾶλλον ἢ φιλόθεοι) or hedonistic rather than holistic. Paul concluded that apostasy takes on a respectable religious nature, but in the end it has “*a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof...*” (v. 5). Societies that allow this behavior to run rampant, coupled with the evil leadership of which Solomon warned, saying, “*If a ruler hearken to lies, all his servants are wicked*” (Prov. 29:12), are ripe for divine judgment if they don’t self-destruct prematurely (cf. Hos. 13:9).

Conclusion

NT church members should recognize that apostasy will abound and intensify until Christ comes back. In the mean time, they should take Paul’s advice and “*from such turn away*” (II Tim. 3:5). Finally, John encouraged the believer saying, “*And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever*” (I Jn. 2:17).

⁴Theodore Epp, *Practical Studies in Revelation* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible, 1969), p. 45.

⁵Harry Ironsides, *The Ironside Collection* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), n.p.

⁶J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publ. Co., 2000 reprint), p. 55.

⁷I.e., “pro-choice” proponents.

⁸“Mall-mania.”

⁹E. g., “the touchdown dance.”

¹⁰Most public school children are the product of atheistic evolutionary inculcation and therefore reject all authority.

¹¹This certainly refers to the mindset behind a deficit-spending society.

¹²This would include murderous sociopaths, bombers, and serial killers.