

## CHAPTER TWO

### "BREAKING AWAY"

(From Apostolic Authority and Doctrine)

*"O foolish Galatians, who did bewitch you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth crucified? This only would I learn from you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?" --Galatians 3:1-3*

The glorious expansion of the kingdom of God in the short Apostolic Age was destined to make a permanent imprint on the world. The Spirit of God, working with men, made this destiny certain. The divine powers enjoyed by the Apostles and prophets of that day were not promised as a permanent fixture of the kingdom, however. When the revelation of the New Testament was complete, the promise of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 was fulfilled. Inspired knowledge *"in part,"* and prophecy *"in part"* was combined in *"that which was perfect."* This "perfect" or complete thing (the full revelation) accomplished what intermittent prophecy aimed to establish. God, in all the Bible, consistently proclaims that the relationship of men with Himself should rest on His Word. The fate of the Children of Israel, whether a "blessing" or a "curse," depended on their response to the Word (see Deuteronomy 11:18-32). And the New Testament believer's own personal spiritual house would be secure, Jesus said, only if he came to Christ, heard His words, and performed them (Luke 6:47). The close of the Age of the Apostles would test whether men would hold to that Word of Faith or not.

The religious historian, Schaff, remarks on the post-apostolic age in a way that shows his awareness of the qualitative loss this world experienced when the Apostles had passed from the active scene. He said...

"We now descend from the primitive apostolic church to the Graeco-Roman; from the scene of creation to the work of preservation; from the fountain of divine revelation to the stream of human development; from the inspirations of the apostles and prophets to the productions of enlightened but fallible teachers. The hand of God has drawn a bold line of demarcation between the century of miracles and the succeeding ages, to show, by the abrupt transition and the striking contrast, the difference between the work of God and the work of man, and to impress us the more deeply with the supernatural origin of Christianity and the incomparable value of the New Testament. There is no other transition in history so radical and sudden, and yet so silent and secret..." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 7.)

#### THE "FALLING AWAY"

The New Testament was written to create an age of hope, and to establish a presentiment of Christ's second coming. Thus, every generation of believers can be motivated by a present anticipation of the final advent of the Lord. However, during the life of the Apostle Paul, he was required by his divinely inspired insights to tell the saints at Thessalonica, *"...touching the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto him; to the end that you be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is just at hand; let no man beguile you in any wise: for it will not be, except the falling away come first, and the man of sin be revealed..."* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). No timetable is given by the Apostle, but it is apparent that he and his fellow prophets knew the signs of that "falling away."

By many warnings, the Apostles showed some potential causes for the great *"falling away."* The writer of Hebrews warned, *"Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God...lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"* (Hebrews 3:12-13). The *"evil heart of unbelief"* and *"sin"* could bring tragic results. Peter says, *"...if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the last state is become worse with them than*

*the first. For it were better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after knowing, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered unto them. It has happened unto them according to the true proverb, the dog turning to his own vomit again, and the sow that had washed to wallowing in the mire" (2 Peter 2:20-22).*

The saints would always have to combat the appeal of the World. Paul said of one of his closest companions, *"Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10a)*. The fear of secular authority would make cowards of many. Paul goes on to say in this context, *"At my first defence no one took my part, but all forsook me: may it not be laid to their account" (2 Timothy 4:16)*. Paul was not discouraged by the failure of other men, because he confidently affirmed in verse 18, *"The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me unto his heavenly kingdom."*

Not only would personal failures cause defections from the truth. There would be doctrinal errors (deviations from truth). Peter warned that men would find *"some things hard to be understood" in the Scriptures credited to Paul, "which the ignorant and unstedfast (would) wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction."* The advice of the Apostle is, *"You therefore, beloved, knowing these things beforehand, beware lest, being carried away with the error of the wicked, you fall from your own stedfastness."* As a further solution, he advised, *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:14-18).*

Lastly, human pride and the search for prestige and power would lead many astray. Paul said, *"But know this, that in the last days grievous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, haughty, railers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, without self-control, fierce, no lovers of good, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof: from these also turn away."* Such men would be *"ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."* They would *"withstand the truth; men corrupted in mind, reprobate concerning the faith" (2 Timothy 3:1-8)*. In another place, Paul said to the Corinthians that he set himself and Apollos as examples of faithful stewards, *"that in us you might learn not to go beyond the things which are written; that no one of you be puffed up for the one*

*against the other"* (1 Corinthians 4:6).

The Apostles also identified several specific seeds of apostasy that sprouted during the Apostolic Age, but which, we will see, bore fruit in the period of the "falling away."

#### ENCROACHMENTS OF OLD TESTAMENT DOCTRINES

The retention of Old Testament practices would be a basic error. One such practice germinated in Antioch of Syria. Jews came there from Jerusalem and began telling the Gentiles, *"Except you be circumcised after the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas disputed this with them, and carried this dispute back to its source, Jerusalem, to show that this doctrine had no foundation. Falsehoods die hard, however. Paul was required later to tell the Christians in Galatia, *"Behold, I Paul say unto you, that, if you receive circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing. Yes, I testify again to every man that receives circumcision, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you are fallen away from grace"* (Galatians 5:2-4). He had already convinced them, through references to the Law of Moses, that all of its subjects *"who continued not in all things that are written in the book of the Law, to do them,"* were accursed (Galatians 3:10). No one under the New Covenant, then, could apply any command of the Old Law to those who were *"discharged"* from it (Romans 7:6). If they kept one single selective obligation, they were obligated to *"keep the whole law,"* an unproductive task, if one wishes to remain connected with Christ.

The temptation to go to the Old Testament for authority carried over into The "Ante-Nicene" period (100 AD to 325 AD). This age is called "Ante-Nicene," because it preceded the first general council of the apostate church at Nicea in 325 AD.

Another case of returning to Old Testament principles involved the re-establishment of the "clergy." Though the Apostles had revealed no distinctions between Christians, declaring that collectively they comprised a *"royal priesthood"* (1 Peter 2:9), the beginnings of a "Sacerdotal Priesthood" like that of the Old Testament emerged. Early 2nd Century writers are credited with making the first distinctions between "clergy" and "laity," but the integrity of their writings has been seriously questioned, many scholars believing them to be corrupted. Tertullian (who lived 160 AD to 230 AD) speaks of its existence, though he says it was not universally accepted. However, Cyprian (who died in 258 AD) treats the

new priesthood as the legitimate successor to the obsolete Aaronic priesthood. Cyprian may have been a leader in trying to establish Old Testament practices in the post-apostolic church, since he also advocated the concept of a ritual "sacrifice" on an altar (a predecessor of the Romans Catholic "Sacrifice of the Mass.") Schaff says...

"The African Fathers, in the third century, who elsewhere incline to the symbolical interpretation of the words of the institution [the communion], are the first to approach on this point the later Roman Catholic idea of a sin-offering; especially Cyprian, the steadfast advocate of priesthood and of episcopal authority. The ideas of priesthood, sacrifice, and altar, are intimately connected, and a Judaizing or paganizing conception of one must extend to all." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 246-247)

Infant baptism, which began as a custom in the Ante-Nicene age, was justified on the basis that it replaced the Jewish practice of circumcising infants (Ibid., p. 258)

In the period after the council of Nicea (325 AD), many other practices based on the precedents of the Old Testament, such as the use of instruments of music in the worship, appear. These encroachments of an obsolete code would attest to the powerful influence of traditional Judaism among the early disciples, and the failure of the descendants of the apostolic age to distinguish between the legal force of the Old Testament and that of the New.

#### TRADITIONS OF MEN VS. TRADITIONS OF APOSTLES

The supposition that traditions carried authority also troubled the apostolic church. The Apostles were very combative against human tradition, as the Lord had been during His earthly ministry. Jesus opposed the "*traditions of the elders*" because they "*made void the Word of God,*" and because men were inclined to "*reject the commandment of God*" in order to keep their traditions. The insidious effect of recognizing tradition on an equality with Scripture caused Jesus to quote the prophet who said, "*In vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men*" (Matthew 15:1-9, Mark 7:7-9).

The Apostles, therefore, preached this same truth. Paul warned the disciples, "*Take heed lest there shall be any one that makes spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ: for*

*in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and in him you are made full...*" (Colossians 2:8-9). Apostolic traditions, since they issued from divine revelation, were the only traditions the disciples were permitted to follow (1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6).

After the close of the First Century, in spite of these warnings, many traditions came into prominence. Men had very little concern regarding the long-range effect of their oft-repeated inventions and fictions. Fabrications about the movements of the Apostles, their deaths, and their teaching, infiltrated the church quickly, and fixed themselves in the collective conscience of the disciples. Some of these traditions dealt with matters that made them relatively harmless, while others were devastating. The most tragic result of their influence is that they finally gained the dubious reputation of having *divine* origin and authority.

#### DENIALS OF CHRIST

The Apostles warned that denials of Christ, symptomatic of a "spirit of anti-Christ," would extend into the future. John wrote, *"Little children, it is the last hour: and as ye heard that anti-Christ comes, even now have there arisen many anti-Christ; whereby we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us..."* (1 John 2:18-19). He identified the anti-Christ spirit in verses 22-23, when he said, *"Who is a liar but he that denys that Jesus is the Christ? This is the anti-Christ, even he that denys the Father and the Son. Whosoever denys the Son, the same has not the Father: he that confesses the Son has the Father also."* Later, He wrote about another aspect of this spirit, and said, *"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesses not Jesus is not of God: and this is the spirit of the anti-Christ, whereof you have heard that it comes; and now it is in the world already"* (1 John 4:1-3). Peter describes such things as *"destructive heresies, denying even the Master that bought them..."* (2 Peter 2:1).

In the "Ante-Nicene period," both of these anti-Christian denials surfaced. Matching John's description of the first kind of denial, Arianism (An early 4th Century heresy

conceived by Arius of Alexandria, Egypt) denied the full divinity of Christ. He was considered to be a created super-being, but not eternal. On the other end of speculative groups came the sect called the "Docetists" (2nd Century "Gnostics" [freely translated "know-it-alls"]). They followed a system which exalted human intellect, and considered human flesh to be inherently evil, a tenet of their pagan religion. This led them to deny that Christ came *"in the flesh."*

#### ERRORS OF ESCHATOLOGY

The Apostles also tried to fend off errors of eschatology (the study of final things). Some in Paul's day made the mistake of *"saying that the resurrection is past already,"* which, because the resurrection was to occur at the final *"coming of the Lord"* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17), tended to *"overthrow the faith of some"* (2 Timothy 2:16-18). We have already noted that Paul had to quash the concept that *"The End"* is *"just at hand"* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). The modern form of this might be called "numbers games," doubtful prognostications which try to set the time of the second coming of Christ. On the other end of the scale, some did not see the end close by, but far away, delayed. They asked, *"where is the promise of his coming? for, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation"* (2 Peter 3:3-4). This view that the future is governed by the constant past influences many today to put off spiritual preparations for the coming of the Lord.

Yet, in the face of apostolic reproofs, an Ante-Nicene form of "Chiliasm" (the view that Christ will reign in an earthly millennial paradise) developed, based on some of the obscure Scriptures in the book of Revelation (such as Revelation 20:1-6). Many had expected the quick return of Christ, because of the promises found in Scripture, and experienced disappointment when they presumed that the predictions had failed. They concluded that an alternate advent theory needed to be formed. In response, Justin Martyr, in the middle of the 2nd Century, taught a form of "millennialism," and was imitated by many subsequent writers. This hypothesis persisted in many places, Schaff says, until...

"Dionysius the Great (who died about 264 AD) checked the chiliastic movement when it was revived by Nepos in Egypt, and wrote an elaborate work against it, which is lost...But the crushing blow came from the great

change in the social condition and prospects of the church in the Nicene age. After Christianity, contrary to all expectation, triumphed in the Roman Empire, and was embraced by the Caesars themselves, the millennial reign, instead of being anxiously waited and prayed for, began to be dated either from the first appearance of Christ, or from the conversion of Constantine and the downfall of paganism..." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 619.)

The millennial errors of that early apostate Christianity are based on the same presumptions as the modern varieties, and are therefore just as false.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL ERRORS

Errors of organization also troubled the church in the time of the Apostles. John rebuked the presumption of *"Diotrephes, who loved to have the preeminence."* In his self-exaltation, Diotrephes *"prated against"* apostolic authority *"with wicked words,"* and would not receive John, or even the brethren sent from him. This local church tyrant *"cast...out of the church"* anyone who desired to receive John's emissaries (3 John 9-10). This situation violated the principles of Acts 20:28, which showed that the "bishops" of the local church in *plurality*, and *together*, were to be overseers, and *"feed the church of the Lord."* Peter applies the same instruction to elders (presbyters); *"Tend the flock of God (local congregation) which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly...neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock"* (1 Peter 5:2-3). By the end of the 2nd Century, in spite of these clear divine instructions, distinctions were being made between "bishop" and "elder" by some of the "Ante-Nicene Fathers," such as Ignatius, the so-called "Bishop" of Antioch (105-115 AD). Bishops, in their minds, "presided" over the elders in local congregations. This deviation in church organization was the first step of many which led eventually to the papacy.

#### OTHER ERRORS

Even what might be called "minor" errors of doctrine were foreseen by the Apostles. In general they warned Christians, as Paul did the Romans, *"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them"* (Romans 16:17). But they also

specified some of these departures from the truth. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul said, "*But the Spirit says expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith...forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by them that believe and know the truth*" (1 Timothy 4:1-3). When the "falling away" came, there was a rise of the practice of celibacy in the clergy, and dietary laws were imposed on the adherents of the apostate church. Schaff summarizes both of these views. On the celibacy issue, he says,

"As the clergy were supposed to embody the moral ideal of Christianity, and to be in the full sense of the term the heritage of God, they were required to practice especially rigid sexual temperance after receiving their ordination. The virginity of the church of Christ, who was himself born of a virgin, seemed, in the ascetic spirit of the age, to recommend a virgin priesthood as coming nearest his example, and best calculated to promote the spiritual interests of the church." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 404.)

Celibacy was voluntary at first, but by the 5th and 6th centuries, the western (Roman) clergy were *prohibited* marriage, though the eastern (Greek) clergy were less rigidly controlled. In view of the Apostle Paul's statement of 1 Corinthians 9:5, Schaff comments,

"It is also self-evident that, if marriage did not detract from the authority and dignity of an apostle, it cannot be inconsistent with the dignity and purity of *any* minister of Christ." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 405.)

Fasting, also, was evidently a voluntary practice among the apostles and the church in New Testament times, rather than a compulsory activity (see Acts 13:2, 14:23). Schaff says, "The apostles themselves sometimes employed this wholesome discipline, though without infringing the gospel freedom by legal prescriptions." But he faithfully reports the rise of *compulsory* fasting in the Ante-Nicene Age with the statement,

"As the Pharisees were accustomed to fast twice in the week, on Monday and Thursday, the Christians *appointed* Wednesday and especially Friday, as days of half-fasting or abstinence from flesh, in commemoration of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. They did this with reference to the Lord's words: 'When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, then will

they fast (Mt. 9:15).'" (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 379.)

We see from this misapplication of Scripture that what had formerly been a voluntary practice, now, in the absence of Apostolic restraint, became an *appointed* practice. Many errors come into existence by this same process.

#### EXALTATION OF MEN

Errors rising from human exaltation were also predicted by the Apostles. The appearance of the "*man of sin*" who "*exalted himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped...setting himself forth as God*" would be the extreme example of this error (2 Thessalonians 2:3b-12). Yet, Paul said to some elders, "*From among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them*" (Acts 20:29-30). Sects would develop around certain men, causing some to say, "*I am of Paul; and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas...*" (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

In the early apostasy, sects did arise that followed and called themselves after men. Montanism (which Schaff describes as a "gloomy and fanatical hyper-Christianity") was a sect named for Montanus. Arianism (which denied full deity to Christ) was a heresy named for Arius. Through the centuries that followed there would be many others.

#### IMMORALITY

Finally, errors generated by moral degeneracy would trouble the early church. Jude warned that men would "*creep in privily,*" who were "*ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness,*" and who could be detected by the fact that they "*in their dreamings defile the flesh, and set at nought dominion, and rail at dignities*" (see Jude 4, 8-19). The Apostle John records the Lord's hatred of the "Nicolaitans," who seem to be described as ones who would "*commit fornication*" (Revelation 2:6, 15). Of the Nicolaitans, Schaff quotes Irenaeus:

"They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. That character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, where they are represented as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols." (Schaff, History, Vol. 2, p. 464.)

The Rome of Paul's day was so degenerate that he warned the Christians there of this influence. He said, "*The night is far spent, and the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off*

*the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk becomingly, as in the day; not in revelling and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:12-14).*

In spite of all these dire predictions of apostasy, however, the Apostles hoped and prayed that righteousness would continue into the future of Christianity. Certainly, some Christians gave them that hope by the way they conducted themselves. Paul writes to some of these, saying, *"But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, for that God chose you from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you through our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours" (see 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17).*

The Apostle John wrote, *"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).* The errors which the Apostles warned us about are with us today in multitudinous forms, yet, in the very warnings of the Apostles against apostasy, we possess keys to facilitate our return to the apostolic order. Every error detectable today can be corrected by a *"thus saith the Lord!"* This requires that we respect the Word as inspired, sufficient, and therefore authoritative. This is not too much to ask of those who love the truth, and it is shown in the writings of the New Testament to be essential to our ultimate salvation.