

The Great Falling Away

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction:

- A. The Lord is coming again - Heb. 9:27-28; Matt. 25:31-32
- B. What the return of the Lord means for us - 1Thes. 4:16-17; 1Cor. 15:51-54
- C. Before that day comes, the apostle Paul prophesied of a great falling away.
 - 1. 2Thes. 2:1-5
 - 2. What is the "great falling away"?
 - 3. It appears that he is saying that a great falling away or apostasy will precede the Second Coming of Christ.
 - 4. Is he predicting a descent into abject immorality like that of Noah's day?
 - 5. Is he describing a specific apostasy that is now part of the history of Christianity?
 - 6. Or is there some other meaning of a great falling away?
- D. The falling away is something that has happened throughout the history of humankind. In every dispensation of time and in every place, men have departed from God's way.
 - 1. The Lord is coming again, and when He comes, men will be falling away from Him and His will.
 - 2. The danger of falling away is an ever present one. It have even happened to those who were once restored; and, it can happen to us just as easily.
- E. Apostasy rarely happens overnight.
 - 1. The path to departure from the faith is usually gradual, hardly noticed by those involved.
 - 2. It begins with a mindset, develops through a pattern of speech, and is soon reflected in the deeds.
 - 3. It is encouraged by a desire to be like the world, rather than to be as God would have us.

I. GREAT FALLINGS AWAY

- A. 1Tim. 3:1-7 - Do Roman Catholic bishops meet these qualifications?
- B. 2John 9 - Do modern denominational doctrines harmonize with this?
- C. Col. 3:16 - Do contemporary religious organizations comply with this?
- D. There have been countless fallings away over the past 2000 years.
- E. Men have often departed from God's way.
 - 1. Cain's unacceptable sacrifice,
 - 2. Nadab and Abihu's unauthorized fire,
 - 3. Jereboam's golden calf,
 - 4. David's ox cart.
- F. "For that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first." Until all apostasy (apostasias) shall have occurred--the great apostasy. There is scarcely any passage of the New Testament which has given occasion to greater diversity of opinion than this." (Barnes Notes)

G. Possibilities

1. A great apostasy before the fall of Jerusalem,
2. The rise of Catholicism,
3. The coming of Islam,
4. The development of Protestant denominationalism,
5. Emperors, dictators, communism, socialism, liberal politicians, ACLU,
6. Ad infinitum et ad nauseum.

II. A FALLING AWAY WOULD COME

- A. Paul warned the Ephesian elders - Acts 20:29-30
- B. Paul warned Timothy - 1Tim. 4:1-3
- C. Peter warned the Christians in Asia Minor - 2Peter 2:1-2

III. A FALLING AWAY DID COME

- A. It began in the first century - 1John 2:18-19, 4:1-3; Jude 4
- B. It continued in the succeeding centuries.
 1. Changes in local church organization from autonomous congregations with a plurality of elders overseeing each congregation - Acts 14:23, 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-9; 1Peter 5:1-2
 - a. To a distinction between bishops and elders in which individual bishops had oversight of geographical areas and multiple churches. (ca. 150 A.D.)
 2. Other changes were slowly introduced, as traditions of men took precedence over the Word of God.
 - a. Clergy-Laity distinction, borrowed from OT Jewish priesthood,
 - b. Religious holidays: Easter, Christmas (3rd-4th centuries),
 - c. Pouring, sprinkling in place of immersion for baptism (251 AD),
 - d. Church councils where doctrinal matters were decided (325 AD),
 - e. Creeds, statements of beliefs developed by church councils,
 - f. Instrumental music (5th century),
 - g. Other doctrines: original sin, infant baptism, penance, premillennialism, and the veneration of Mary.
- C. A falling away remains in the present.
 1. Appeals to reformation did not work in spite of the efforts of Luther, Calvin, et al, to reform the Roman Catholic church.
 - b. Their followers simply created a myriad of denominations, keeping some of the human traditions and adding new ones.
 2. Appeals to new revelation have not worked by means of Mormons, Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostal churches.
 3. The only solution that had a hope of working is restoration.
 - a. Like Ezra and Nehemiah when they restored the Jewish worship after the Babylonian exile - Neh. 8:1-18
 - b. Like John the Baptist did when he prepared the people for the coming of the Lord - Luke 1:13-17

4. But a survey of church history examining the Restoration Movement demonstrates that most of the movement failed, forming new denominations: Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, Independent Christian Churches, progressive churches of Christ, and institutional churches of Christ.

IV. THE FALLING AWAY IS STILL HAPPENING

- A. There will always be potential for apostasy - 1Tim. 1:19-20; 2Peter 2:20-22
 1. Give heed to warnings - Heb. 2:1-3, 3:12-14, 6:11
 2. The pull of the world continues to draw many Christians away.
 - a. 2Tim. 4:10; 1Tim. 6:9-10
- B. "I also see the beginnings of Non-Institutional Church of Christ denominational reasoning reflected in the question, "Can you help me find an NI Church?" (Mark Copeland)
 1. It is "sound" or "faithful." Use Bible words to describe Bible things.
 2. Beware brethren, of being numbered among those of the great falling away when the Lord comes again.