

The Apostasy and Early Christian Fathers

From Robert Hyatt Essays

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The fact that the Catholic Church had strayed from the original church is the message of the Protestant Reformation, not just the LDS church. Thousands of churches believe that the original church through apostasy gradually ceased to exist. After the 12 Apostles died and false doctrines engulfed the church, the Priesthood and Authority to act for God was taken from the church. The philosophies, rhetoric, mysticism, of learned men, namely the Greeks won the battles of thought and Christianity lost. The world slipped into the dark ages and never recovered until the reformation.

Because the church was taken from the Earth for a season, the Lord had to restore this when the time was right. This He did through the prophet Joseph Smith. He restored the original Priesthood Authority and organization of the primitive church, i.e. Apostles, Prophets, Temple Ordinances, etc. and revealed many of the mysteries containing the truths of the gospel that had been lost because of the Apostasy.

In order to understand how the Apostasy came to be, it's important to know some of the early Christian Fathers. The following is information obtained and condensed from the Encyclopedia of Catholicism.

Early Christian Fathers:

St. Ignatius of Antioch

75AD Bishop of Antioch. On his way to be executed in Rome he wrote seven letters to churches and communities which became a source for early church doctrine and organization.

St. Justin Martyr

150AD He was taught early the teachings of Aristotle and Plato and was gifted in the art of philosophy. Became converted to Christianity but continued to use philosophy to teach the gospel truths to the early Christian church.

Tertullian

200AD Converted to Christianity in Roman Africa. Was apocalyptic in his teachings. He was also gifted in rhetoric and ironic wit. He wrote many writings on doctrine including his views on the Trinity.

Clement of Alexandria

200AD Wrote the Clementine Recognition's. Studied in several philosophical schools. He tried to reconcile Greek philosophy and the Christian faith. He considered philosophy as preparatory for Christian revelation. He was the head of the catechetical school in Alexandria.

St. Alexander of Jerusalem

225AD Was the Bishop that ordained Origen a Priest.

Origen

250AD Disciple of Clement. Spent the last 20 years of his life in Caesarea in Palestine. He was considered the greatest teacher of Christian doctrine of his time for both the churches in the East and West. He was schooled first of the Gnostics, then by Alexandrian Platonists. Also schooled in philosophy. He was a disciple of Clement of Alexandria, also expert in the schooling of Greek philosophy. He was appointed catechetist by Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria because of his gifts of mysticism and his rigorous intellectualism. He felt that all Christians should be schooled in arithmetic, music, geometry, astronomy, grammar, and rhetoric. He taught his students in the philosophical currents of the day then taught them to apply their Christian beliefs from the Bible. He believed in the notion of pre-existent human souls.

Emperor Constantine

325AD Constantine was a Roman Emperor sympathetic to the Christians. He hosted the Council in Nicaea to resolve the Arian controversy or Nature of the Godhead (Trinity). At the end of his life he favored the Arian position and even became a Christian, ironically by Arius himself. Despite his alignment with Arius, the Church of the East still venerated him as a Saint.

St. Alexander of Alexandria

325AD Bishop of Alexandria from 312 - 328AD. He led a local Synod to depose Arius, one of his priests. The Bishop of Alexander and one of his deacons Athanasius who later became a Bishop himself, were the most responsible for defeating the Arian doctrine of the Godhead both in Alexandria and at the Council of Nicaea.

Athanasius of Alexandria

325AD Although only a Priest at the time, Athanasius became the most active member of the Council of Nicaea in defiance of the Arian position. Athanasius later became the Bishop of Alexandria after St. Alexander, but many questioned the validity of his election and 7 years after he became Bishop, he was exiled by Emperor Constantine. He returned to Alexandria after the death of Constantine but soon found himself exiled again and again. In fact he was exiled 5 times.

Arius

325AD Arius was a Libyan theologian who later became an ordained priest in Alexandria. He believed that Jesus Christ was not God the same way that God the Father was God, but that Jesus came from the Father. Because he believed and taught this doctrine he was excommunicated by a council of Egyptian and Libyan Bishops. Arius left Egypt and traveled to Palestine and Syria to gain support for his beliefs. He gained support from Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, both Bishops. This doctrine called Arianism, sparked a heated controversy among the Christian churches of the East and West. Because the doctrine caused such a disturbance, Emperor Constantine called a council to resolve the issue. Arianism was rejected by the council held at Nicaea in 325AD and for the sake of peace, Constantine banished Arius to Illyricum.

Arius later returned to Alexandria because Constantine actually liked Arius and believed in Arianism, thus reinstated him as Presbyter in Alexandria. Only a short time after returning, Arius was found poisoned to death. Arianism did not cease at the death of Arius, but continued to flourish for several centuries there after.

Eusebius of Caesarea

325AD Eusebius called the "Father of Church History" was the Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. He studied under Pamphilius who held the library of Origen. After Pamphilius' martyrdom, Eusebius undertook to write the History of Origen and other early church leaders. Eusebius initially offered support of Arianism and pleaded his cause at the Council of Nicaea, but under pressure Eusebius changed his position and gave support to the Nicene Creed.

Eusebius of Nicomedia

325AD Eusebius was a Bishop of Nicomedia and together with Eusebius of Caesarea gave support for the doctrine of Arianism at the Council of Nicaea.

St. Eusebius of Vercelli

Fourth-Century Bishop noted for his support against Arianism. Many of his writings previously attributed to Athanasius, including a translation of the Gospels were found to be his and not Athanasius.

St. Hilary of Poitiers

350AD Hilary, a Bishop of Poitiers, known as the "Athanasius of the West", taught the doctrine of the Trinity against Arianism. Hilary was regarded as the "Doctor of the Church". Having been exiled from France to the eastern Mediterranean, he was exposed to and soon embraced the teachings of Origen and Greek Philosophy. These he used in support of the Trinity, fighting many battles of doctrine, following the Council of Nicaea.

St. Basil ("the Great")

370AD Basil became Bishop of Caesarea following the death of Eusebius. He is credited with bringing the Arian controversy to a close. Basil was taught early by his father and while at Athens, Greek Philosophy and rhetoric. He left Athens, came to Caesarea, and was ordained a priest by Eusebius. Basil was a champion of the poor and built many projects for their relief. Basil, like Hilary before him was considered a "Doctor of the Church".

St. Ambrose of Milan

375AD Ambrose was a Bishop in Milan when it was the governmental seat of the Roman Empire. He was very fond of Allegory and Rhetoric and Origenistic style of allegory. He used these in his sermons. Augustine writes in his "Confessions", that it was Ambrose's teachings that most influenced him to become a Christian. Ambrose fought to end the government-sponsored use of Arian worship.

Augustine of Hippo

400AD St. Augustine was a ordained a Bishop at age 41 and it is said that no other single theologian has had a greater influence on the shape and character of Catholic as well as Protestant churches. Augustine was converted early to Greek philosophy and was very gifted in the art of rhetoric. While a professor of rhetoric in Milan, he came in contact with the teachings and sermons of Ambrose and was later converted, baptized, and eventually ordained a Bishop. He served as a Bishop for 35 years and thus became one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church, (the other being Thomas Aquinas 1225AD).

St. Jerome

400AD St. Jerome was regarded as one of the greatest Biblical scholars of his day. Following a dream he dedicates his life to Biblical studies. He was ordained a priest and became the personal secretary to Pope Damasus. The Pope encouraged him to revise the Old Latin Bible. As a result St. Jerome completed the translation which became the official Bible of the Catholic Church called the Vulgate Bible. He fiercely opposed Arianism and Origenism.

The Bible speaks of the Apostasy:

New Testament epistles clearly indicate that serious and widespread apostasy. James decried “wars and fightings among” the Church (James 4:1). Paul lamented “divisions” in the Church and how “grievous wolves” would not spare “the flock” (1 Cor. 11:18; Acts 20:29–31). He knew an apostasy was coming and wrote to the Thessalonians that Jesus’ second coming would not occur “except there come a falling away first,” further advising that “iniquity doth already work” (2 Thes. 2:3, 7).

And Peter presupposed the falling away, or the Apostasy, when he spoke of “the times of refreshing” in the last days, that would come before God would again send Jesus Christ, who “before was preached unto you:

Paul, too, wrote of the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Rom. 11:25; Eph. 1:10), a particular time of times, which would “gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (Eph. 1:10; see also Rom. 11:25).

Apostasy in the Early Church

Paul is perhaps the best witness of the eroding forces washing away the foundation of the Church. One impression that his letters give is that he and his companions spent considerable energy trying to smother the flames of apostasy.

In one letter we read that, within two or three years after his mission to central Asia Minor, many Christians there had perverted the gospel. (See Gal. 1:6–12; Gal. 3:1–5.) Paul’s epistles to Church members at Corinth illustrate how unstable some of the Christians there were. When we read his letters to members in Colossae, Thessalonica, and Ephesus, we sense that the struggle over points of doctrine and policy continually persisted and festered. Moreover, much of Hebrews 2 and 4 [Heb. 2, 4] is devoted to warning Jewish Christians against losing what they had received from the Savior’s atonement.

In 1 Timothy, Paul lays down straightforward instructions to his longtime friend, recently called as an ecclesiastical authority in Ephesus. But in 2 Timothy, which Paul wrote near the end of his ministry, we sense that Timothy had become discouraged because of the severe problems he had had to face, including droves of members turning away from the true path. Paul wrote that “all they which are in Asia” had turned away. (2 Tim. 1:15.)

The information in Revelation 2 and 3 was addressed about A.D. 90 to specific congregations in cities near the west coast of Asia Minor. The Lord even accused some of the branches of the Church of having fallen headlong into apostasy. Of the seven that John addressed, five had serious problems with dissension and apostasy. (See Rev. 2:4–5, 14–16, 20; Rev. 3:1–2, 15–16.)

During the first several centuries of apostasy, the major doctrinal disputes centered on the Savior’s resurrection and the exact nature of his mission—the very points on which the Apostles were charged to testify. (See Acts 1:8, 21–22.) We can see how serious the absence of the Apostles became, since such issues continued as centers of controversy among Christians until the fifth century A.D.

Most of the difficulties arose from within the Church, as Paul had said they would. (See Acts 20:29–30.) One misunderstanding of the resurrection had [page 10] occurred early in Ephesus. Paul wrote to Timothy concerning two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus, “who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.” (2 Tim. 2:17–18.) Rather than denying the physical resurrection, as did later Corinthians, these two men taught that Christians had already experienced the renewal of life, presumably through baptism, and need not look forward to the resurrection.

The Corinthians seemed to have had long-term problems with accepting the resurrection. Paul’s first letter to members in Corinth centers on the reality of a physical resurrection, and his second letter bears fervent testimony of that doctrine. (See 2 Cor. 4:11–14.) Much later, Clement says that he and other Roman leaders had been consulted about a serious schism in the Corinthian congregation. Clement claims that the division among Christians in Corinth arose because of the jealousy and envy of apostates. (See 1 Clement 1–4.) In another passage, however, Clement identifies the resurrection as a central issue: some were denying bodily resurrection. (See 1 Clement 24–27.)

Much of the misunderstandings about the resurrection must be attributed to the notion of docetism, which came to be more and more influential during the second century. The term derives from the Greek verb *dokeo*, which means “to seem.” Docetics maintained that Jesus had only seemed to live among men, to suffer, and to die. In reality, they said, the heavenly Christ did not come into contact with the world of matter, for that would have defiled his divine nature.

Such a view of the Messiah denies that salvation comes as a result of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. In fact, the doctrine of salvation was subverted into the idea that Christ was a special messenger who brought to earth secret knowledge that would allow the elect to escape this corrupt world and to make their way back to the presence of the Father. This special

knowledge was called gnosis, and those who held such a view of the Messiah were known as gnostics.

Several places in the New Testament indicate that the Apostles were already trying to combat these false conceptions of the Savior. Both 1 and 2 John were written to warn of and correct such ideas:

“Many false prophets are gone out into the world.

“Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:

“And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.” (1 Jn. 4:1–3.)

In the second epistle, John repeats, “Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.” (2 Jn. 1:7.)

In addition, we should note that modern interpreters of John’s gospel have felt that the sentence, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), was directed against those who denied that Jesus had possessed a mortal body and that it had undergone a physical resurrection. John’s gospel and letters demonstrate that docetism had made deep inroads in Christian thought before the end of the first century.

In its earliest forms, gnosticism had crept in even before Paul’s death. Paul employs many terms familiar to gnostics in his letters to Ephesus and Colossae, trying to correct their misunderstanding of the Savior’s mission and of the nature of the Church. Following are two examples of Paul’s use of gnostic language to correct early gnostic belief:

“Whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him. ...

“Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

“To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:16, 26–27.)

Paul’s first letter to Timothy also contains an explicit attack on gnosticism, which nevertheless developed a powerful influence during the second century A.D.

“O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge [gnosis], for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.” (1 Tim. 6:20–21, Revised Standard version.)

What we see at the end of the first century is a church full of dissensions. All the Apostles were gone, save John, and no one could appeal to the voice of God that comes through his appointed servants. In fact, Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, knew of only one person by the mid-second century who possessed the gift of prophecy—a man named Quadratus. (Ecclesiastical History, 3.37.1.)

Persecution against the Christians must have had some effect as well. A letter written to the emperor Trajan by Pliny the Younger, when the latter was proconsul of Bithynia and Pontus in A.D. 111–12, says that many Christians turned against the Church when they were threatened with death. But as the Church slipped irrevocably into apostasy as a body, the record of martyrs also tells us that many others remained firm in their testimonies of the resurrected Lord.

The New Testament writers not only prophesied of persecution and complete apostasy to come, but also attested to the disabling presence of the two during the first half of the first century A.D., less than fifteen years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The crippling difficulties in the Church did not cease. For after the deaths of its leaders, the Church was left to wander, making its way haltingly until its original form and authority were lost.

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