

The Falling Away

While clearing out a thick underbrush, I noticed that I had lost my wristwatch. So I searched for a long time for it. Finally, in the very last place I looked, I found it!

Even a listening child would probably respond, “Why would you look further after you found it?”

After we have found “the answer” to a Biblical question, why look further? Too often, I have learned to my dismay that I had “found” the answer in the last place I searched, but I should have searched further! That is true concerning my conclusions about “the falling away” mentioned in the Scriptures.

Many times I have taught lessons on “The Church: The Falling Away and Restoration.” I would chart out on the blackboard, indicating the beginning church, the falling away through the development of Catholicism, the Reformation bringing denominationalism, and the “Restoration Movement” in which we presumably restored the original church. Because reformers pointed to the Catholic religion as the apostasy and the pioneers of our movement were so confident of that also, I needed to look no further. Who was I to question the historical answers!

I had two dependable proof-texts. The first: “Now we beseech you, brethren, by the **coming of our Lord** Jesus Christ, and by our **gathering together unto him**, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that **the day of Christ** is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that **day** shall not come, except there come a **falling away** first and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that as God he sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Etc.” (2 Thes. 2:1-12 - KJV).

Adding to my “proof” was: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the **latter times some shall depart from the faith**, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their consciences seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:1-3 -KJV). Since the popes claim to be vicars of Christ, are called “Holy Father,” require celibacy of those in holy orders, have restrictive regulations about foods, and have offered signs and wonders supporting their claims, why look further for fulfillment of Paul’s predictions? The search stops when you find the answer.

After the Lord’s patience with me for decades, however, with some surprise I recognized that Jesus himself had spoken of this falling away. Reluctantly admitting that his explanations were more authoritative than the spin we had put on the subject, I began to see that I should have looked further in my search. In fact, I should have accepted his word on the subject as the original source of information which was reaffirmed to Paul by the Spirit.

For sake of brevity and emphasis, Jesus’ words in Matthew 24 (RSV) will be abridged and highlighted.. “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the **sign of your coming and of the close of the age?** And Jesus answered them, ‘Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, **I am the Christ (Messiah), and they will lead many astray.** And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but **the end is not yet ...** And then **many will fall away ...** And many false prophets will arise and **lead many astray ...** most men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures **to the end** will be saved.... And **then the end will come.** For **false Christs (Messiahs) and false prophets** will arise and show great **signs and wonders, so as to lead astray**, if possible, even the elect. Immediately after the tribulation of those days the **sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken;** then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will **see the Son of man coming** in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a **loud trumpet call**, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. So also, when you see all these things, you **know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**” (Please read v. 1-35 with special attention to the highlighted parts.)

WOW!! How could I have been so blind? All along Jesus has been telling me that the falling away would take place before the generation of his listeners passed away! I had his own word for it but did not comprehend it. I had chosen to listen to the spin of commentators instead of him! Even though I may be blind to his word, it will not pass away or be proven untrue.

What was this “falling away”? It is the *apostasia*, meaning revolt or rebellion, from which we get the word *apostasy*. Look into your more recent translations of the Bible. The word is translated *the rebellion* in the RSV, NIV, and The Living Bible. The TEV has *final rebellion*. The Phillips’ Version renders it *a definite rejection of God*. In the NEB it is *the final rebellion against God*.

Long before Paul wrote concerning that falling away or rebellion, Jesus had warned, “They will lead many astray,” “Many will fall away,” and “false prophets...will lead many astray” .. “so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”

Jesus was asked about “the sign of your coming and of the close of the age.” He used terms like, “but the end is not yet,” “He who endures to the end,” and “then the end will come,” accompanied with “a loud trumpet call.” Later, Paul referred to it as “the coming of our Lord,” “our gathering together unto him,” “that day,” “the day of Christ,” and “the latter (later) times.”

At this coming of the Lord in vengeance upon his rebellious people, Israel, their entire system was to fall, being pictured by Jesus in apocalyptic language as the upheaval of heavenly luminaries. Such figurative language of dramatic upheaval was common among Hebrew writers. In predicting overthrow of nations, it was used by Isaiah about Babylon (Ch. 13), Damascus (Ch. 7), Ethiopia (Ch. 18), and Egypt (Ch. 19; Ezek. 32). Joel used such materialistic descriptions (Joel 2:28-32) and Peter quoted them as relevant on Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). We may address this further at another time.

In these happenings they would see the sign of his coming,. They would “see” (discern) him in heavenly visage in the clouds according to his promise in the Olivet Discourse quoted above. (Relate these passages also: Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 1:10-11; Matt. 10:23; 16:27-28; Mark 8:38, 9:1; Luke 9:26-27; 21:12; Rev. 1:7.).

What is the time setting for all these dramatic events? The end of time? The Bible does not indicate that time will ever end, as though that were possible! Is it the dissolution and end of this physical universe? The Bible does not speak of such! Jesus stated plainly when it would happen: **“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till ALL these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”** “Heaven and earth” would pass away at that time, but he was not speaking of the physical universe, but of the then-present system through which God had dealt with Israel. The nationalistic status of Israel, ruled by their luminaries in high places in the political kingdom and their religious system, would reach its end. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus made it clear that this upheaval would occur in the events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In the texts cited above Jesus repeatedly informed his listeners that these things would take place in the life-time of some of them.

Do we have to verify the fulfillment of Jesus’ predictions historically, that is, by identifying names, places, and events involved. Absolutely not! We have his word which will not pass away. Shall we trust uninspired historians more than Jesus’ own words?

It is true that Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived at the time, verifies many things by supplying specific names, places, and events, but my trust is in Jesus’ own words rather than the respected historian. Historians can be inaccurate, and we tend to pick and choose from ancient records, accepting that which substantiates our own notions.

The rebellion of the Jews against God was not altogether new, but rather it was climactic and final in that generation. God-defying men displaced the priesthood and took over the temple and instigated revolt against Roman rule at the same time. In that time of terrible upheaval in their nation many Jews abandoned their faith, as did many disciples of Jesus also. The passages under study do not indicate that there was ever to be a total abandonment of the faith by disciples. None of these passages indicate that the church would disappear or be obliterated. The kingdom of the Messiah is eternal and indestructible. It would never need

restoration! There would always be saved people – those who constitute the church. The church is not an organization that can be traced historically. However, since the church is erring people saved by grace, it will always be in need of **reformation**.

Must we identify those who would forbid marriage and require abstinence from meat? Certainly the Catholic church does not forbid all marriage or command total abstinence from meat. Some of those restrictions were a part of the Law of Moses and also a thorny problem of early Christians. In the first century, the Essenes, as an example, were ascetic, promoting celibacy over marriage and were very restrictive of diet. This is not to say they are the ones Paul referred to necessarily, but it indicates that we do not have to wait hundreds of years to find people who would fit Paul’s description. The Gnostics, or some similar philosophical sect, might be considered. Unless Jesus and Paul were predicting two different “rebellions” or “fallings away” (and there is no evidence to that effect), we will have to take Jesus’ word that this development was in the life-time of some of his listeners.

In passing, here is another note of interest. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus declared: “..then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” That would be experienced by some of that generation. Many years later, John repeats Jesus’ prophecy, saying, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye shall see him, every one who pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Rev. 1:7). This destructive visitation upon the Jews (tribes) came upon that generation. This is a clear indication that John wrote *Revelation* before the occurrence of the things Jesus predicted for his generation.

If the falling away/rebellion occurred in the first century as this treatise proposes, how can we defend our claim of being a “restoration of the New Testament church”? If it was not obliterated – a time when there were no saved people on earth – restoration of the church is a mistaken concept. It is usually based upon the concept of an organized system of religion. No group of disciples can trace itself historically to the apostles.

It is difficult to accept that the falling away occurred during the lifetime of Jesus’ listeners. That is not due to lack of clarity of the statements of Jesus and Paul. It is difficult because we have built so many wrong ideas around our traditional misconceptions.

When the gospel is preached, believed, and obeyed, the church is being produced, for the church is the saved people. The Lord does not form an organization but creates a fellowship of those reconciled. It is a “here and now” relationship in any age or nation without dependence upon any historical connection.

In speaking of the kingdom, Jesus stated that “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). In view of that, I once composed this little rhyme which has won me no “Pullet Surprise” for obvious reasons:

Christ’s church is sparkling new,
Yet we’re nineteen centuries old,
Like wheat which this year grew,
And has for years untold
Tough time may kill each crop,
Another fills our need,
Not by perpetual plant,
But by life-giving seed. []