

# The Reformation And The Restoration

A Tale Of Two Movements

By Andy Sochor

The New Testament repeatedly warns about drifting; in particular, drifting away from the faith. This can be done either individually or collectively.

- The Hebrew writer warned the Christians to whom he wrote that they “must pay much closer attention to what [they had] heard, so that [they would] not drift away from it” (Hebrews 2:1).
- The Lord Himself rebuked the church in Ephesus because they had “left [their] first love” (Revelation 2:4).

There is always a danger that any one of us – or any one of our churches – could drift away from the faith. However, Paul also warned about a great apostasy that was coming not long after his lifetime.

“Let no one in any way deceive you, for it [the return of Christ, as] will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?” (2 Thessalonians 2:3-5).

Paul explained that this “mystery of lawlessness [was] already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). As he described this “man of lawlessness,” he was not referring to one person, but an attitude. This apostasy would take place over some period of time. It was a spirit of error, an attitude that led Christians to depart from the pattern revealed in the New Testament. It was “restrained” for a time (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7) by the persecution from the Roman authorities. However, once that opposition was removed, the departures from the faith would increase exponentially.

It did not take long after the time of the apostles for this wholesale departure from the truth to begin. It started with a change in the organization of the church. During the first century, local churches were overseen by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5). By the time of the second century, churches began appointing one elder (bishop) to preside over the others. Eventually the authority of these bishops would increase over a certain territory rather than simply over a local congregation. This concept grew until you had a large hierarchy, legislative bodies, and eventually a chief bishop recognized as the head over the entire church (a pope).

This gradual progression gave rise to the Roman Catholic Church. Little by little, from one

generation to another, the church drifted further and further away from the picture given in the New Testament until it was something completely unrecognizable when compared with the Lord's church in the first century.

As this progression unfolded, other doctrines began to develop that were foreign to the New Testament. These doctrines included the concept of Purgatory (that some souls would be purified after death) and Transubstantiation (that the emblems of the Lord's Supper became the actual body and blood of Christ). There were also practices which began to be introduced that were different from what the early church practiced under the guidance of the apostles. Building off of the evolution of church organization with the bishops and higher officials, a distinction was made between clergy and laity. Then celibacy was made a requirement for the clergy. Instrumental music was added to worship. Indulgences were sold as a way to raise money for the church with the promise that they would act as a substitute for penance or would free a departed loved one from Purgatory.

### The Reformation Movement

The last practice – the selling of indulgences – helped launch the first of two major movements – the Reformation Movement. Pope Leo X authorized the sale of indulgences to raise funds for the construction of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. John Tetzel was commissioned to sell indulgences in Germany. Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and ordained priest, opposed this practice and challenged it by nailing his famous ninety-five theses to the door of a church in Wittenburg in 1517. He was later excommunicated because he refused to renounce his views.

Luther was not the first to try to reform the Catholic Church. There were other individuals and groups who challenged the doctrines and practices of the church and the authority of the pope. But Luther's efforts seemed to be a catalyst for a larger movement.

The spirit of Luther and other reformers is commendable. They saw how the Roman Catholic Church had departed from the teachings of the New Testament and wanted to do something about it. However, the shortcoming of these reformers is that they were trying to reform the Catholic Church rather than restore the church of the New Testament.

The Catholic Church developed as it did because they adopted three sources of authority – the Bible, the decrees of the pope, and church tradition. The reformers, even though they protested against the Catholic Church (hence the reason why they came to be called Protestants) and rejected many doctrines and practices, still followed three sources of authority. However, instead of following the Bible, the decrees of the pope, and church tradition as the Catholic Church did, they followed the Bible, the word of man, and the tradition of man. This was evident in the adoption of man-made creeds that were used to codify their beliefs and practices and differentiate themselves from the church they were protesting.

Over time, this led to the formation of a number of different Protestant denominations. The

movement began with an effort to reform the Catholic Church. However, it did not result in one "Protestant Church." As other "reformers" would arise within the Protestant churches, they would see some error – real or perceived – that needed to be corrected and attacked it. As they developed a following, a formal statement of faith and practice would be adopted among them (a creed). This process led to the formation of the Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church, Episcopal Church, Baptist churches, and many more. There continue to be hundreds of these "Protestant" denominations that exist today that came from this Reformation Movement.

### The Restoration Movement

Just as the Reformation Movement was born as a response to the problems that existed in the Roman Catholic Church, another movement was born as a response to the problem of division that existed within the Protestant churches that were part of the Reformation Movement. This new movement which began in the 1800's in this country was the Restoration Movement.

One of the key differences between these two movements had to do with what was appealed to as a source of authority. As we noted earlier, the Catholic Church appealed to three sources of authority – the Bible, the decrees of the pope, and church tradition. Protestant churches rejected the latter two, but did not repudiate the concept of the three sources of authority; so they followed the Bible, the words of men, and the traditions of men. This resulted in their creeds and the countless divisions among them.

Those who were involved in the Restoration Movement – men like Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell – called for unity among believers by simply following the Bible and rejecting all man-made creeds. The following statement by Thomas Campbell came to be known as the "motto" of this movement: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent" (The Search for the Ancient Order: Volume 1, p. 47). As a result, these restorers left the churches of men in order to try to simply follow Christ and His word.

Barton W. Stone was one of the signers of The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery. He and the others realized that in their response to the problems they saw in their previous denomination, they had formed another denominational body in the Springfield Presbytery. So in this document (The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery), they explained why they were dissolving that body and also called upon all Christians to reject the creeds and churches of men and simply read the Bible and follow it. Notice part of this document:

"We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling."

"We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and

as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into life having one book, than having many to be cast into hell.”

“Finally, we will that all our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully, that they may see their fate there determined, and prepare for death before it is too late.”

This is not to say that the men involved in this movement perfectly returned to the doctrines and practices revealed in the New Testament in every way. The more we study about these men, the more we might see instances in which they adopted some man-made religious practice or held onto some teaching that was not in harmony with the pattern found in the New Testament. However, their goal was noble and they were on the right track regarding how to deal with the divisions and errors of the religious world – simply go back to the Bible. Alexander Campbell wrote the following:

“We have no system of our own, nor of others to substitute in lieu of the reigning systems. We only aim at substituting the New Testament in lieu of every creed in existence; whether Mohammedan, Pagan, Jewish or Presbyterian. We wish to call Christians to consider that Jesus Christ has made them kings and priests to God. We neither advocate Calvinism, Arminianism, Arianism, Trinitarianism, Unitarianism, Deism or Sectarianism, but New Testamentism. We wish, we cordially wish, to take the New Testament out of the abuses of the clergy, and put it into the hands of the people” (Men of Yesterday, p. 78).

This desire to follow the Bible alone – without man-made creeds, papal decrees, or human traditions in religion – is what we have been called to do by the Lord’s apostles. Notice the following passages:

“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17).

“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13).

“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).

“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

If we go beyond the teaching of Christ, we lose our fellowship with Him. If we are merely hearing the word but not practicing it, we are deceiving ourselves. We must strive to do all things by the authority of Christ and hold fast to the pattern found in His word.

Jesus also expressed the need for His followers to obey His will and not follow what seemed best to them:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who

does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

"Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46).

It is not enough just to call Jesus "Lord." We must follow His teachings and those of His apostles who were commissioned by Him to make disciples and teach them to observe all that the Lord commanded (Matthew 28:19-20).

### Conclusion

There is much to be learned from a study of the past. We can also find encouragement from the examples of those who saw the shortcomings in the religious world around them and had the courage to try to change. But in the end, our standard and authority is not anything these men said or did - whether they were part of the Reformation or the Restoration Movement. Our standard is the word of God.

Let us heed the warning we noticed at the beginning - do not drift from the teachings of Christ and the instructions revealed in His word. If we find we have done this, let us have the courage to change course and go back to the Bible to find what we need to do to please Him.