

Apostasy, Restoration, and Lessons in Faith

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We affirm that the Apostasy and the Restoration occurred just as foretold. Both offer us lessons in the importance of following the Savior's chosen leaders.

Supported by scripture and the words of prophets, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches unequivocally that there was an apostasy from the Lord's one and only true church following the deaths of Christ's early Apostles. So thorough was this apostasy that the original Church of Jesus Christ was supplanted by an institution having a form of godliness but devoid of priesthood power and priesthood keys.

Knowledge of this apostasy underscores two other truths proclaimed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. First, one purpose of the Lord's true church in any age has been to prepare Saints through participation in sacred ordinances to stand in the presence of Almighty God. Second, a restoration of power and authority to perform those ordinances was not only necessary but actually occurred through the instrumentality of Joseph Smith, Jr., beginning in 1820.

Testimony from the New Testament

As the Apostle Paul said good-bye for the last time to some of the members of the Church he had grown to love so deeply on his missionary journeys, he gave them this chilling warning of things to befall the growing body of disciples:

"I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

“Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30).

This may be the most pointed and succinct description in all scripture of how the great apostasy of the early Church came about. It may also be the most important key to understanding how to recognize and avoid apostasy in modern times. Surely Paul knew that the apostasy that would significantly change the Lord’s church was *not* going to be a gradual drift from divine truth or a waning interest in gospel principles. Nor would it be well-meaning but erroneous activity on the part of a few misguided souls. *Apostasy* is a Greek word—*apostasía*—and means literally “to stand apart from,” “to rebel against,” or “to revolt.” Apostasy is a conscious act of rebellion against God by deliberately attempting to change divinely appointed doctrine and practice and by opposing God’s chosen leaders. Paul foresaw that once the Apostles met their demise, the demise of the true Church would follow.

Paul used the analogy of wolves rending the flock of God to describe the thoroughly destructive nature of religious rebellion. Furthermore, he declared without equivocation that apostasy was an *internal* phenomenon. It was born of the desires of certain members to exalt themselves, to step into the limelight and gather their own group of followers: “of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30; emphasis added). Nephi of old may have labeled it something else (that is, priestcraft), but he outlined the same basic ingredient of apostasy—pride.

“He [the Lord] commandeth that there shall be no priestcrafts; for, behold, priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion” (2 Ne. 26:29).

From within the Fold

Thus apostasy, by definition, occurs *within* the covenant community. John the Beloved provides verification of this fact. Writing his epistles after apostasy had set in, he witnessed the fulfillment of Paul’s prophecy. He said: “They [anti-Christ] went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 Jn. 2:19). Such a message teaches modern Latter-day Saints a powerful truth about *where* one might see the signs of individual apostasy in our day.

This development within the early Church was not surprising to the Apostles. They knew how apostasy had grown among the house of Israel, among those who referred to themselves as the children of the Abrahamic covenant (see John 8:33, 37–44). Jesus pointed out both the internal nature of apostasy and the malice of apostates when he

charged certain Jewish leaders with the blood of all the martyred prophets and Saints from the foundation of the world (see [Luke 11:39-51](#)).

What *was* surprising to the Apostles was the speed with which apostasy began to overtake the Church. In his letter to the branches of the Church in Galatia, Paul wrote:

“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel” ([Gal. 1:6](#)).

The Source of Apostasy

Latter-day Saints hardly need to be told that the father of all apostasy is Satan. What may not be so obvious is that the clearest account of Satan’s own apostasy in the premortal existence fits perfectly the pattern seen in New Testament times, namely, that rebellion occurs from within the covenant community and is the result of unmitigated pride. Having been told in Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–26 [[D&C 76:25–26](#)] that Lucifer, a son of the morning, was an angel in authority in the presence of God, we may read [Moses 4:3–4](#) with renewed clarity and personal application.

“Because that Satan *rebelled* against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him *mine own power*; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

“And he *became* Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice” (emphasis added).

Here we are told explicitly of Lucifer’s great crime; he “rebelled” against God, or, in other words, he apostatized from God’s established order. He did so by seeking to change the plan of the Father and then audaciously attempting to usurp God’s own power, prerogatives, and glory. Though he did not start out as Satan, he *became* Satan through opposition. (The original Hebrew word *satan* means “adversary.”) He drew away his own cadre of disciples who refused to follow the Father and the Son. He and his followers were then expelled from the heavenly realms, free for a time to lay hold on the minds and hearts of willing rebels in every earthly dispensation. As expressed by John the Revelator, “It was given unto him [Satan] to make war with the saints, and to overcome them” ([Rev. 13:7](#)). The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “the moment [Latter-day Saints] revolt at anything which comes from God, the devil takes power.”¹

This is the very thing the Apostle Paul predicted would happen in the early Church. In a letter to the Thessalonian Saints, he foresaw that there would “come a falling away ... 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 he as God sitteth in the temple of God [the Church]², shewing himself that he is God” (JST, 2 Thes. 2:3–4). This sounds very much like Paul knew the story told in [Moses 4:1–4](#).

Paul went even further by outlining, in a letter to his associate Timothy, some of the characteristics that certain apostate leaders and false prophets would demonstrate. They would “depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

“Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

“Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats” (1 Tim. 4:1–3).

In other words, these apostate leaders would act out of deliberately dishonest motives; they would appear to possess “a form of godliness” but would not have the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5; see also 2 Tim. 3:1–4).

The Power and the Apostles

There is no question that the authority from God to guide and preside over the Church of Jesus Christ resided in the Apostles of the Lord. Jesus reminded the Quorum of the Twelve of this fact on different occasions. For example, he said to Peter, one week before they stood together on the Mount of Transfiguration: “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall loosed in heaven” ([Matt. 16:19](#)).

This, and more, did indeed transpire on the holy mount. The Twelve had been given the Melchizedek Priesthood a year earlier when they were ordained Apostles and sent on missions (see [Matt. 10](#)). But the keys of the priesthood (the powers of presidency needed to direct how and when the priesthood should be used) were not transferred to them until that fall season six months before the Savior’s crucifixion. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “The Savior, Moses, and Elias, gave the keys to Peter, James and John, on the mount, when they were transfigured before him.”³

A short time after the Mount of Transfiguration experience, Jesus spoke to all of his Apostles about the keys of the kingdom that they all had received by then. As with Peter, he told them they would have the power to bind and loose on earth and in heaven, and added, “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven” ([Matt. 18:19](#)).

Only to the Apostles were these special powers given! Only they could speak for the whole Church and set its affairs in order. President Brigham Young said:

“The keys of the eternal Priesthood, which is after the order of the Son of God, are comprehended by being an Apostle. All the Priesthood, all the keys, all the gifts, all the endowments, and everything preparatory to entering into the presence of the Father and of the Son, are in, composed of, circumscribed by, or I might say incorporated within the circumference of, the Apostleship.”⁴

One by one the Apostles chosen by Christ were killed, as he had predicted (see [John 16:1–4](#)). James, the brother of John, was the first member of the Quorum of the Twelve that we know of to be executed, sometime around A.D. 44 (see [Acts 12:1–2](#)). Others followed. James the Just, the brother of the Lord, may have been martyred in A.D. 62.⁵ And then during the Neronian persecutions of Christianity in Rome (A.D. 64–67), “the Church suffered the greatest loss it had yet sustained in the death of the apostles Peter and Paul.”⁶ Thus, as scholars point out, no tradition about the early Church is more firmly held than that “all the Apostles except John were martyrs.”⁷ The Apostolic Age came to an end,⁸ and the keys of the kingdom were gone.

The Crumbling Foundation

The deaths of the Apostles meant the loss of what Paul had called “the foundation” ([Eph. 2:20](#)) of the Church. This loss allowed false brethren to drive the true Church “into the wilderness” ([Rev. 12:6](#)) until the promised restoration. Modern scholars have labeled the post-apostolic era an “obscure period.”⁹ Indeed it was, for the doctrinal integrity of the Church began to be compromised with self-appointed rulers stepping in to fill the void left by the Apostles’ passing. Formerly, bishops and other Church officers had been appointed and supervised by the Apostles, as indicated in the book of Acts and Paul’s letters (see, for example, [Acts 6](#); [1 Tim. 2](#), [1 Tim. 3](#); [Titus 1](#)). But immediately after the Apostolic Age, things changed radically. Evidence indicates that by the end of the first century, the great apostasy was an accomplished fact. Paul’s prophecies had been fulfilled.

This is demonstrated in a work whose author is unknown, written perhaps at the end of the first century and entitled *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It directs: “Appoint for *yourselves*, therefore, bishops and deacons ... for unto you they also perform the service of the prophets and teachers.”¹⁰ In other words, self-appointed bishops were to be regarded as filling the same roles as prophets had earlier. Of this post-New Testament record, the religious historian Williston Walker has written: “The *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* shows that self-seeking and fraudulent claimants to divine guidance were soon preying on the churches.”¹¹

The same picture emerges from the writings of a late first-century bishop at Rome named Clement. He was identified by Eusebius of Caesarea, the fourth-century “Father of Church History,” as that same Clement praised by Paul for being among those “whose names are in the book of life” (Philip. 4:3). Clement wrote to correct “the abominable and unholy schism” in the Corinthian branch of the Church, a situation that had resulted from apostates deposing Church officers (bishops and deacons) who had been lawfully and authoritatively appointed by the Apostles.¹²

Clement stated emphatically that it was the Apostles who had overseen the Church and had appointed converts to be deacons and bishops.¹³ Therefore, the rebellion against, and unlawful rejection of, legitimate priesthood leadership was the height of religious sedition. But worse than that, says Clement, is the fact that the “schism has led many astray; it has made many despair; it has made many doubt; and it has distressed us all. Yet it goes on!”¹⁴ Here two important truths are corroborated: mass apostasy destroys the faith of many, and it is hard to curtail.

Without the Apostles

“All historical Christian churches agree that revelation for the direction of the church ceased with the last of the apostles,”¹⁵ one author has written. History shows, in fact, that after the first century, church¹⁶ leaders, in order to decide important issues, could not (and did not) appeal to heaven for authoritative direction because they did not possess the keys of the kingdom. There were still honorable people on the earth who received personal inspiration for their individual lives. But the church was run largely by men who gathered in councils and held debates, letting their decisions rest on the collected wisdom of mortal beings.

There were several attempts to correct the course of the church that existed after the first century A.D. The most wrenching of these resulted in the great reformation of the late Middle Ages, a movement that spawned the development of Protestant denominations. However, it is significant that certain denominational leaders continued to recognize the importance of Apostles in the true Church of Jesus Christ. Bohemian reformer John Huss (1369?–1415), lecturer at the University of Prague and supporter of English reformer John Wycliffe (1328?–1384), said: “I am attracted by his [Wycliffe’s] writings, in which he expends every effort to conduct all men back to the laws of Christ, and especially the clergy, inviting them to let go the pomp and dominion of the world and live with the apostles according to the life of Christ.”¹⁷

The most impressive acknowledgment of the necessity of Apostles comes from Roger Williams (1603?–1683), founder of the first Baptist church in the American colonies. Williams was educated at Cambridge University, apparently ordained in the Church of

England, and set sail for North America in 1630 searching for religious freedom. These are his words:

“There is no regularly constituted church on earth, nor any person qualified to administer any church ordinances; nor can there be until new apostles are sent by the Great Head of the Church for whose coming I am seeking.”¹⁸

Apostles Restored

After centuries of silence and confusion about religion among mankind, God spoke his will again clearly and definitively in 1820. As a result, the true Church of Jesus Christ was reestablished on earth; the apostolic office and authority were restored to the Prophet Joseph Smith and to Oliver Cowdery by the early Apostles Peter, James, and John (see [D&C 27:12](#)). As early as June 1829 (almost a year before the official organization of the Church), Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were commissioned to select the first Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in this last dispensation (see [D&C 18:26–38](#)). It is instructive to note that three signal events preceded the organization of the Church: the First Vision, the publication of the Book of Mormon, and the restitution of the keys of the kingdom.

Modern revelation specifies that the Twelve Apostles hold the keys of the priesthood, just as they did in ancient times (see [D&C 107:35](#); [D&C 124:128](#)). The Prophet Joseph Smith added that “the fundamental principles, government, and doctrine of the Church are vested in the keys of the kingdom.”¹⁹

It was no mere afterthought of heaven, in the wake of the Apostasy, that led to the calling of Joseph Smith as the prophet of the Restoration. President Brigham Young taught:

“It was decreed in the counsels of eternity ... that he, Joseph Smith, should be the man, in the last dispensation of this world, to bring forth the word of God to the people, and receive the fulness of the keys and power of the Priesthood of the Son of God.”²⁰

President Young taught also that Joseph Smith shared those keys with men called as Apostles by revelation²¹ and that “an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ has the keys of the holy Priesthood, and the power thereof is sealed upon his head, and by this he is authorized to proclaim the truth to the people.”²²

The message that the doctrines of the ancient Church of Jesus Christ have been restored, along with the priesthood power that directed it, is a recurrent theme for modern prophets. For example, President Joseph F. Smith: “Joseph the Prophet ... became the

means, in God's providence, to restore the old truths of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ, the plan of salvation, which is older than the human race."²³

President David O. McKay: "His Church is established among men ... 'never more to be overthrown or given to another people.' That Church was not established by man nor by legislative enactment; but by the Redeemer himself"²⁴; and, "This Church stands out as making the distinctive claim that the authority of the priesthood has come directly from God the Father and the Son, by revelation to Joseph Smith."²⁵

More recently, from President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "Individually and collectively, the Twelve hold the keys and have confirmed the authority to exercise all of the keys upon the senior Apostle, the one man who is to preside over the Church."²⁶

And from that very man at this time, President Gordon B. Hinckley: "This church does not belong to its President. Its head is the Lord Jesus Christ. ...

"This, my brethren and sisters, is the work of the Almighty. ... It is a divine work restored through a chosen prophet."²⁷

Avoiding Apostasy

The New Testament provides Latter-day Saints with a clear understanding of the nature of apostasy. It begins within the covenant community and is born of pride. Its author is Satan, and it is perpetuated by those who seek their own interests rather than the welfare of the Church. Apostasy pits members against those of the apostleship, the principles and doctrines they teach, and the inspired direction and counsel they give. In ancient times, apostasy caused the loss of saving ordinances administered through the keys of the priesthood. In modern times, the greatest tragedy of apostasy, or spiritual rebellion, still is the loss of invaluable, eternal blessings.

Though the promise is that the *Church* will remain as a body on the earth in this dispensation, *individuals* can fall away. Therefore, we must be ever vigilant to ward off personal apostasy. The scriptures teach this powerful lesson to members of the Lord's covenant community: reject the temptation to step into the limelight or gather a group of personal followers, and instead *stay focused on the Brethren of the apostleship!* Obey them; pray for them; support them; do not knowingly contradict them; resist the urge to become an "armchair prophet"—to preach or postulate on the direction the Church ought to take.

If we are on guard against apostasy, we will examine our personal motives and eschew self-serving behavior; teach family and friends nothing but what the Brethren and the

scriptures admonish; beware of others who set themselves up as authorities on certain issues or doctrines, or who play the devil’s advocate in order to illuminate “all sides of the issue”; not lend support to those who criticize the Lord’s prophets, seers, and revelators; and, above all, pray for the desire to love, honor, and follow those who hold the apostleship. They hold the keys of the kingdom. They are our foundation, “Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” ([Eph. 2:20](#)).

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Hide References

Notes

1. [1.](#)

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 181.

2. [2.](#)

See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), p. 86. The author explains here that Paul almost always used the term *temple* figuratively to refer to the Church.

3. [3.](#)

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 158.

4. [4.](#)

In *Journal of Discourses*, 1:134–35.

5. [5.](#)

See Henry Chadwick, *The Pelican History of the Church, Volume 1: The Early Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 18. We know that James was an Apostle from Paul’s comment in [Gal. 1:19](#).

6. [6.](#)

J. W. C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church to A.D. 500* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1953), p. 17.

7. [7.](#)

Bonnell Spencer, *Ye Are the Body: A People's History of the Church* (West Park, N.Y.: Holy Cross Publications, 1979), p. 35.

8. 8.

Ibid.

9. 9.

Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 34.

10. 10.

Walker, p. 46; emphasis added.

11. 11.

Ibid., p. 45.

12. 12.

See 1 Clement 1:1-2, in Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 43. The same basic translation of Clement's words is also provided by the following works: Kirsopp Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949); J. B. Lightfoot, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973).

13. 13.

See 1 Clement 42:1-4, in Richardson, p. 62.

14. 14.

1 Clement 46:9, *ibid.*, p. 65.

15. 15.

James L. Barker, *Apostasy from the Divine Church* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), p. 650.

16. 16.

In this article from this point on, a distinction is made between *Church* (capitalized, meaning the Church as established by Jesus Christ) and *church* (not capitalized, meaning the apostate institution).

17. 17.

Barker, p. 683.

18. 18.

Quoted in *The Great Prologue: A Prophetic History and Destiny of America* [Bicentennial family home evening supplement] (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), p. 4.

19. 19.

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 21.

20. 20.

Discourses of Brigham Young, sel. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), p. 108.

21. 21.

Ibid., pp. 141–42.

22. 22.

Ibid., p. 136.

23. 23.

Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 14th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1966), p. 489.

24. 24.

David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), p. 66.

25. 25.

Ibid., p. 98.

26. 26.

Ensign, May 1995, p. 7.

27. 27.

Ibid., p. 71.