

THE ROADS TO APOSTASY

Background

The word 'apostasy' derives from the Greek *apostasia* which means to 'withdraw' or to 'fall away' (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Today it is used to mean the abandonment by a professing Christian of the fundamental principles of the Christian gospel. The history shows that apostasy does not generally come into the church as a single event. Its encroachment is gradual and insidious. All Christians therefore need to be aware of the 'roads' that lead to apostasy, alert to the possibility of treading those roads themselves, and prepared to help others to see the danger. The short letter of Jude in the New Testament warns about this dreadful danger. The Holy Bible identifies at least three dangerous 'roads':

1. The 'way of Cain' (Jude 11), i.e. a 'bloodless' religion, that rejects in some way the full Bible teaching on the Cross;
2. The 'error of Balaam' (Jude 11), i.e. compromise with the world (see also Study 16 – *Separation* – in this regard);
3. The 'teaching of the Nicolaitans' – compromise with the world, but especially with other religions.

There are surely other paths that lead away from 'the Way' (Acts 24:14, 22) but these three above seem to have beset Christ's church from the very beginning. We examine them in greater detail below:

The Way of Cain

This applies when a Christian seeks a way of forgiveness of his sins by any other means than cleansing by the blood of Jesus. The idea that we can be forgiven by our 'good works' is perhaps the most insidious and pervasive example; or, through the intellect, to believe that Jesus is an 'example' that we should strive to follow in our own strength, but not feel too disheartened when we fail! This is perhaps the key outcome of 'modernism' or 'liberalism' wherever it is encountered in the church of Christ – it certainly seems to have made real headway in the organised church in the twentieth century. An apparently opposed form of the error of Cain is those religious people (and we have in mind here people within the Christian church) who may be trusting in their religious profession or their 'zeal' for God, whilst sin remains unsundered and uncleansed in their hearts. The zealot and the extreme liberal are closer than either of them would like to admit!

If we understand the biblical account of Cain (Genesis 4) correctly, it seems that Cain found no peace with God, and then looked in anger at his brother whose sacrifice had been found acceptable to God. Anger can be a sign that sin remains uncleansed. Not only individuals, but also whole Christian communities can tread the 'way of Cain'. We think then of extreme liberal 'churches' with no vital message – or strictly orthodox ones, but often riven with internal dissension and jealousy.

Genesis 4:1–5 (Hebrews 11: 4); Acts 15:1, 2, 19, 24; 20:30; 2 Corinthians 11:3; Galatians 1:6–9; 2:11–16; 3:1–4; 6:12–15; Philippians 3:18, 19 (the perversion of the cross of Christ into a license for sin); Colossians 2:16, 17, 20–23 (adding non-essentials to the gospel); 2 Timothy 4:3–4; 2 Peter 2:1–2; 14–15; 2 John 7; Jude 3, 4 and 11.

The Way of Balaam

For the Christian this implies compromise with the world. (2 Peter 2:15). It is clear from the account in the book of Numbers that this prophet-for-hire failed God in two ways:

He desired to make a market of his divine gift (Numbers 22:12, 18, 19). Although in the end he reluctantly complied with God's commands (the right decision), he seemed to look for a change of heart in God that might bring him material rewards.

He taught the Israelites to defile themselves with heathen practices (Numbers 25:1 – 3; 31:16).

For the Christian disciple, Balaam's way represents any 'sharp practice' with money, or of making the Lord's service a way to worldly advancement or gain. It also represents worldliness, when the soul is no longer satisfied with the Lordship of Jesus, and so satisfaction from the world is sought. The result is a church infected by this worldly spirit, and accordingly resorting to worldly methods (e.g. raising money via lottery) or dependence on the arm of flesh (e.g. asking for State handouts so as to be able to perform 'good works'). At one extreme, parts of the church seem to think they are an extension of the social services. For a time such methods may appear to succeed, but there is an inevitable loss of spiritual vitality and an increasing deadness in ministry.

Matthew 7:15; Luke 16:13; 2 Corinthians 11:13–15; 1 Timothy 6:5, 10; 2 Timothy 3:5; 2 Peter 2:17, 20–21; Jude 11, 16.

The Teaching of the Nicolaitans

The Nicolaitans were a heretical sect of the very early church mentioned twice in the book of Revelation. (Revelation 2:6, 15).¹ Amongst some 'Christian' sects is found 'priestcraft' and religious domination in different ways. This is an intrusion of a man-made priesthood. Jesus the Christ is our high priest and has opened up a way for all believers that is independent of any human agency. At its worst, this priestcraft tries to divide the body of Christ into priests and laity, and to put the 'priests' into the position of mediators between man and God. The effect is that both 'priest' and people tend to lose faith in Christ alone and instead put their faith in ceremonial and outward forms. There are many warnings of this and it does seem that in the end times, an apostate 'Christendom' will be reunited under one supreme head (and possibly united with other religions). The Bible calls this person *the* antichrist as he will set himself up as a Messiah of some sort.

Priestly domination seems to lead invariably to religious persecution.

Isaiah 1:4–6; 13–15; 5:5–7; Ezekiel 8:9–16 (idolatry in the House of the Lord); Colossians 2:20–23; 1 Timothy 2:5; 4:1–3.

In Conclusion

Believers in the true Messiah, Jesus, are to be alert to the temptation from our enemy to turn away from the salvation journey on which we are embarked. The warnings are sufficiently frequent, both in the Old and the New Testaments, that we cannot avoid the conclusion that we are being given *real and urgent* warnings. It would be foolish to ignore these. The illusion of self-earned salvation, the temptations of the world, and the imposition of false religiousness are each real and dangerous errors to avoid. Christians should prayerfully be aware of these, on the watch for them, and gently seek to help others who may be in danger of falling into them.

Note

¹ Revelation is a symbolical book in many areas: it is possible that the heretical sect was led by someone called Nicolaus. But it is perhaps more likely that this word is a symbolical one meaning *nikao* (= to conquer) and *laos* (=the people, or the laity).