

What is **Apostasy**? Or Christians Fallen Away? Or Christians Taken Away?

Jim van Heiningen

In the New Testament, one verse especially is well-known for its use of the word ‘**apostasy**’. This is **2nd Thessalonians 2:3**. The verse usually runs like this - depending on the version used:

“Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way.

For that day will not come unless the *apostasy* comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction”.

Notice that the apostle writes about a coming “**Day**” - in this verse as well as in the one before (verses 2 & 3). That ‘Day’ will not dawn on the world if there has been no “apostasy” first...

Now, ‘apostasy’ is a Greek word, usually translated in this verse as “rebellion” or “falling away” (from the faith). History and experience teach us that such ‘apostasy’ is *not* something sudden, dramatic and short-lived. In fact, such apostasy develops slowly, insidiously and may be much worse in certain regions of the world than in others. As a new day dawned at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, it may be said that the ‘Dark Ages’ had lasted a thousand years. They showed a marked contrast to the first century when the Light of the World was being lit everywhere. The apostasy of those ‘ages’ could hardly be worse! For one thing, the Bible, generally speaking, was not even in the language of the people. For its use and distribution, it had to be copied laboriously by hand (in Latin), and only a priest here and there might own a copy..., in any case most people were illiterate.

Here’s a telling example: Menno Simons was born in 1496, in the North of the Netherlands. He was 21 when Luther nailed his theses to the church door. Menno was not illiterate, yet when he was consecrated as a priest, he had never ever read the Bible, nor did he read it during his first *ten* years in the priesthood. Eventually, as he started to read and study his Bible and as he took good note of the powerful testimony of the ‘Anabaptists’, under the worst possible persecutions, Menno was converted and left the RC Church. Now being a true lover of God’s Word, the Lord started to use his servant wonderfully in preaching and teaching. His ‘followers’ became known as “Mennonites”. For a time, the movement was one of the very few exceptions in ‘Christianity’. ‘Religion’, on the whole, was still an affair of priests, images, monasteries, superstitions and paying your dues. Yes, the candle lit by the Reformers was a great blessing, but it too started to flicker...

There is remarkable consensus among the New Testament authors, and our Lord, about the beginnings of such ‘apostasy’. They all point at their own time! In other words, the kind of ‘apostasy’ we’re talking about started among his followers, *not* in the end times - rather in their own life times. The Lord’s teaching in Matthew 7 and 13 on the subject (and in Revelation 2-3), is followed up by the dire warnings of Paul, James, Peter, John and Jude. Note too how Paul puts the Ephesian elders on notice in Acts 20.

Then, what started during the apostles’ life time, took root soon after, and the ‘falling away’ grew out of all proportion. In Matthew 13 Jesus pictured it in the parable of the ‘tares’, getting comfortable among the ‘wheat’ right up to ‘harvest time’. In the parable of the ‘leaven’ (or ‘yeast’) he points at the insidious nature of such ‘apostasy’. Now, a ‘mustard seed’ that becomes a ‘mustard tree’ will be much applauded, but it is not real..., a ‘mustard tree’ does not exist! It makes you think of another kind of ‘parable’, the one of the ‘emperor’ who thinks his brand new attire is absolutely grandiose, when in reality he is strutting around in his ‘undies’! Common symptoms: the Vatican, the cathedrals, other grandiose ‘sanctuaries’, processions, vestments, choirs, modern ‘worship’, anything that will make us look ‘mega’, modern and momentous, like the non-existing ‘mustard tree’...

However, let’s remember how Jesus drew attention to all the ‘birds’ that were nestling among its ‘branches’! ‘Birds’ here typify demons (see the first parable of Matthew 13, and Rev. 18:2). Demons feel very much at home among Christianity’s ‘branches’. Demons couldn’t care less about those origins, way back, of the ‘faith-like-a-mustard-seed’. Once Christianity had become the Roman Empire’s official religion in the 4th century, the rampant ‘apostasy’ led to those ‘Dark Ages’ - the demons’ heyday! Remember, when Luther was ‘lighting candles in the dark’, how those very demons tried to assault him in many ways?

Before coming back to ‘apostasy’ we must have a look at the “day”, as it is mentioned by Paul in **2nd Th. 2:2 & 3**. What particular ‘day’ is he talking about? The context should help us. In the last two

chapters before this one, i.e. in **1st Thess. 5 & 2nd Th. 1**, we find that Paul is writing of the Day of vengeance and wrath, i.e., of the **Day of the Lord**. Then, in *this* chapter 2, verse 2, the translators had to choose between two expressions: “Day of Christ” or “Day of the Lord”. The thing is that *some* of the old Greek manuscripts have the one expression and *others* have the other; in other words, some have “Day of Christ”, and some have “Day of the Lord”. Since “Day of Christ” typically is a reference to the Day of the Rapture, when Christ comes for his saints (e.g., see Phil. 1:6); and since Paul’s previous two chapters are *not* dedicated to the Rapture, rather to the Lord’s coming in wrath, which includes the Great Tribulation and his invasion of the planet after that (pictured in Revelation 19), when He sets up his Millennial Kingdom, it would seem there is no choice. We must take Paul’s reference to the ‘Day’ as pointing to the “Day of the Lord”. This is further born out, of course, by the other dramatic verses of this chapter, right up to verse 13.

But, for the ‘Day of the Lord’ to come, Paul explains, the “man of sin”, i.e., the Antichrist, must have come out into the open first. At the present, something, or someone, is holding him back. It should be obvious that Satan’s highest representative on earth should very much want to take full control of the ‘New World Order’... So what is restraining him? In Matthew 5 our Lord states that HIS EKKLESIA - his disciples - are “the **salt of the earth**..., and the **light of the world**”. ‘Salt’ was known for its quality of holding back ‘corruption’, and ‘light’ for keeping ‘darkness’ at bay. There we have it, the ‘salt’ and the ‘light’, they are still here and they are still holding back! Take them out, like Lot was taken out from Sodom, and Rahab from Jericho, and the ‘man of sin, can have his day in the limelight. Of course, it all has to do especially with the Holy Spirit, who indwells the EKKLESIA. Paul states that “He restrains until HE is taken out of the way”.

On the day that the restraint is gone, the ‘mystery of lawlessness’ will have ceased to be a mystery and “**the lawless one will be revealed**”. Knowing that he has a short time allotted to him, he will bring “peace & safety” (1st Thess. 5:3), followed, however, by “sudden destruction”! Ominous descriptions of that time are found in the chapter we are looking at (2nd Thess. 2), and in Daniel 11:36-37 and Revelation 13.

So before the Antichrist can take the reins, God’s EKKLESIA must be taken out of the way... But don’t most versions of this chapter give us a very different idea...? What we’re waiting for, according to these versions, is not the “taking away”, but the “falling away”, i.e., the ‘apostasy’ of the EKKLESIA. And yet, as we have seen, great apostasy *has been* occurring ever since New Testament times... In this confusion, we must have a good look at that particular word and the concept of apostasy.

‘**Apostasy**’ is not a translation, rather a transliteration from the original Greek. Bible translators usually just leave it like that in this particular verse, *without* translating it. Even so, some do translate it; for example, as ‘falling away’, rebellion’ or ‘revolt’. But, once we grasp what the Greek word really means in English, we are in for a big surprise. Its meaning is ‘**departure**’. The Greek word is derived from the expression ‘certificate of divorce’ in Matthew 5:31, which indicates that, henceforth, the man and the woman go their separate ways. As a verb, ‘apostasy’ is used for ‘**depart**’ in passages like Luke 2:37; 4:13; 13:27; Acts 12:10; 15:38; 19:9; 22:29; 2nd Cor. 12:8; 2nd Tim. 2:19 and Hb. 3:12. In my version (NKJV), everyone of these ten verses has the verb “**depart**”, except Acts 22:29, where “**withdraw**” is used! So what could have happened to 2nd Thessalonians 2:3? Why, in lots of versions, isn’t the word even translated at all?

It appears that some of the first Bible translators simply had a preconceived idea about the ‘apostasy’ word! We may compare it to translator Jerome in the 4th century, He translated the Bible into Latin, known later as the “Vulgate”. Jerome too had his preconceived ideas, for example, he felt that the Greek word ‘presbúteros’ (elder) was equivalent to ‘priest’, and so, on occasions, instead of translating it as ‘elder’, he left it untranslated. From this failure of proper translation then, sprouted the episcopalian system of the ‘priestly hierarchy’, honored not only by the RC Church, but by many denominations. A small oversight of Jerome led to huge consequences...

At this point you may be curious as to what Jerome did with the Greek ‘apostasy’ word in 2nd Th. 2:3. Very interestingly, he actually translated it properly with the Latin word “*discessio*”, which is ‘**withdrawal**’ in English!

Other translators after Jerome, felt the ‘apostasy’ word meant ‘abandonment’ ‘rebellion’, or ‘unfaithfulness to’ - or ‘falling away from’ - one’s ‘religion’. Consequently, as the translators opted for leaving it untranslated, just transliterated, their readers too began to (mis)understand this word in the same way.

Paul again mentions ‘apostasy’ in the following epistle. He writes: ‘**In later times some will depart from the faith**’ (1st Timothy 4:1). But, lo and behold, here we get the proper translation into English of the ‘apostasy’ word (‘depart’). But we must not miss the fact that Paul writes about a departure ‘**from the faith**’. And then we should note that that is *not* the same kind of ‘departure’, written about by Paul in 2nd Thessalonians 2:3! He doesn’t mention “the faith” there at all. He is not pointing to a “departure” or “withdrawal” from “the faith”! What is he writing about to the Thessalonian saints? He is definitely writing about a departure or withdrawal, BUT **not** ‘from-the-faith’. In perfect keeping with all that he wrote before, what he is impressing on the brethren at Thessalonica is the promise of a sudden and most dramatic withdrawal **from the planet!** In the ‘blink-of-an-eye’ millions are suddenly GONE. And the remains of further millions are also missing - from their graves.

Didn’t Paul say in verse 1: “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ **and our gathering together to Him**”? And in **1st Thess. 4:13-18**, hadn’t he given the wonderful details of the expected *departure* (the rapture) of **all** the saints, i.e., of the living and the dead?

We must emphasize the importance, especially in the case of 2nd Thessalonians 2:3, of realizing that the English word ‘apostasy’ does not now, in our modern day and age, properly convey what it was meant to convey in the first century in Greek. The modern meaning is an *acquired meaning*, which is *not* what the Thessalonians understood Paul to tell them. They understood it in the context in which he was writing to them, i.e.: ‘concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and **our being gathered to Him**’ (2:1). In other words, to them it was about the sudden and dramatic rapture of **the redeemed**, the sudden departure from earth of the **EKKLESIA**. With that disappearance of the entire **EKKLESIA**, all of the Lord’s redeemed, the ‘restraint’ on the ‘man of sin’ is removed. Thus, Antichrist appears on the scene, which, in turn, ushers in the 7-year period of Great Tribulation. At the present, Paul says, the evil ‘mystery’ is already at work, but not yet its ‘manifestation’. As soon as the **EKKLESIA** is removed, there will be a full manifestation of that evil one who will claim to be the great Savior of the world. Verses 2:6-12 make that clear.

Interestingly, like Jerome, William Tyndale also got it right! That great translation pioneer of the early 16th century, at age 42, paid as a martyr for his loyal and loving service of translating the Bible into English from the original languages. William put 2nd Thessalonians 2:3 in this way: “Let no man deceive you by any means, for the Lord cometh not, except there come a departing first, and that that sinful man be opened, the son of perdition”.

A modern version, with the convenience of modern resources and expertise, renders the verse like this: “Let no one deceive you in any way. For it (God’s Day of Reckoning) will not be, unless **the departure** comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction” (*World English Bible - emphasis added*).

After the God-given Reformation of the 16th century, when much new life sprang up everywhere, the ‘falling away’, through the mystery of iniquity, continued again, and it will go on right until the end. There’s a lot of ‘mystery’ in three of the parables in Matthew 13. The weeds, looking so much like the wheat, are of no use whatever, but, mysteriously, they continue to grow among the wheat till the end of the age. They may be observed by some, but are undetected by most. The mustard plant ‘mysteriously’ grows into a tree, a huge tree. The leaven in the hands of the ‘woman’ makes the dough to ‘rise’ mysteriously.

The Antichrist is not waiting for a ‘falling away’ that takes place in the end time. His ‘mystery of iniquity’ has been at work since day one. What he is waiting for is the removal of the ‘salt-and-light’ - the ‘restraint’ that isn’t allowing him to come out of the woodwork. When it finally happens, it will be simultaneous with the ‘weeds’ being shown to be just weeds; the ‘mustard tree’ is cut down to size, and that delicious ‘leavened bread’ is found to be moldy through and through.

In the Great Departure of the Saints, it will become perfectly, and dramatically, clear who are the ones that have ‘fallen away’. They have not departed with the others! Being no more than name Christians, they are left behind. In his parable of the ten virgins (Mt. 25), Jesus says that half their number, the foolish ones, simply ‘kept up appearances’; they had their oil lamps, but the oil was missing... They could not enter with the five wise ones who did have oil and whose lamps were burning. They never even saw the Bridegroom, not even when He told them: ‘**I don’t know you!**’ The irony of the ‘apostasy’ word is that now, in its acquired meaning, we are bound to apply it to the five foolish virgins, whereas in its real and original meaning it should be wonderfully applied to the five wise virgins - they ‘**departed**’ to be with the Bridegroom!

Are you ready for departure?