

Apostasy & Other Religions

Neal A. Maxwell, “From the Beginning,” *Ensign*, Nov 1993, 18.

Teaching about history’s major apostasies has long been one of the restored gospel’s “givens,” but it is not always given much attention. My aim, therefore, is internal instruction, not external persuasion, since we fully understand that certain of our beliefs are not shared by others and vice versa. But goodwill can still prevail. In fact, with you, brothers and sisters, I rejoice in the good works and the voices of faith of many in other religions. For instance, recent papal pronouncements on chastity are both appropriate and courageous, and I applaud them. So many honorable individuals in the world do so much without what we, as members, call gospel fulness, while some of us, unfortunately, do so little with so much!

We believe Adam and Eve were this planet’s first humans and first Christians.

“And thus the Gospel began to be preached, *from the beginning*, being declared by holy angels sent forth from the presence of God, and by his own voice, and by the gift of the Holy Ghost.

“And thus all things were confirmed unto Adam, by an holy ordinance” (Moses 5:58–59; emphasis added).

Hence, brothers and sisters, a particular pattern of divine instruction followed, early on, just as occurred in the later Restoration. “Therefore [God] sent angels to converse with them, who caused men to behold of his glory.

“And they began from that time forth to call on his name; therefore God conversed with men, and made known unto them the plan of redemption” (Alma 12:29–30; see also Moses 5:58–59).

However, this initial fulness was soon lost. Resulting fragmentation, diffusion, and distortion contributed to a wide variety of world religions—Christian and non-Christian.

President Joseph F. Smith observed that amid this diffusion certain laws and rites were “carried by the posterity of Adam into all lands, and continued with them, more or less pure, to the flood, and through Noah, ... to those who succeeded him, spreading out into all nations and countries. ... What wonder, then, that we should find relics of Christianity, so to speak, among ... nations who know not Christ, and whose histories date back ... beyond the flood, independent of and apart from the records of the Bible” (in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:325; see also Alma 29:8).

Earlier fulness was followed by periodic “famine[s]” of “hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Ancient Israel’s fallings away were cited by Jehovah, including their changing ordinances, breaking covenants, and rebellion (see Isa. 24:5; Ezek. 2:3).

A major falling away occurred after the deaths of the Apostles, “the sowers of the seed” (D&C 86:2; see also Jude 1:17; Mosiah 26:1).

New Testament epistles clearly indicate that serious and widespread apostasy—not just sporadic dissent—began soon. James decried “wars and fightings among” the Church (James 4:1). Paul lamented “divisions” in the Church and how “grievous wolves” would not spare “the flock” (1 Cor. 11:18; Acts 20:29–31). He knew an apostasy was coming and wrote to the Thessalonians that Jesus’ second coming would not occur “except there come a falling away first,” further advising that “iniquity doth already work” (2 Thes. 2:3, 7).

Near the end, Paul acknowledged how very extensive the falling away was: “All they which are in Asia be turned away from me” (2 Tim. 1:15).

Paul was even wrongly accused of teaching “Let us do evil, that good may come” (Rom. 3:8). Slandering Paul may have reflected some Nicolaitan nonsense by suggesting that since God provides a way for us to be saved from our sins, we should sin in order to allow Him to do that great good! No wonder the Lord in the book of Revelation denounced the pernicious doctrines and deeds of the Nicolaitans (see Rev. 2:6, 15; LDS Bible Dictionary, “Nicolaitans”).

Widespread fornication and idolatry brought apostolic alarm (see 1 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:3; Jude 1:7). John and Paul both bemoaned the rise of false Apostles (see 2 Cor. 11:13; Rev. 2:2). The Church was clearly under siege. Some not only fell away but then openly opposed. In one circumstance, Paul stood alone and lamented that “all men forsook me” (2 Tim. 4:16). He also decried those who “subvert[ed] whole houses” (Titus 1:11).

Some local leaders rebelled, as when one, who loved his preeminence, refused to receive the brethren (see 3 Jn. 1:9–10).

No wonder President Brigham Young observed: “It is said the Priesthood was taken from the Church, but it is not so, the Church went from the Priesthood” (in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:69).

The concerns expressed by Peter, John, Paul, and James over the falling away were not paranoia but prophetic warnings about “Apostasia.”

Another force was at work too: the cultural Hellenizing of Christianity. Wrote Will Durant in *The Story of Civilization*, “The Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual” (part 3, Caesar and Christ, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944, p. 595). The errant grooves earlier used in

defining deity were already there and were so easy to slide into (see Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, pp. 75–81, 152–58).

Another scholar concluded: “It was impossible for Greeks, ... with an education which penetrated their whole nature, to receive or to retain Christianity in its primitive simplicity” (Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, reprinted 1970, p. 49).

Paul’s experience in Athens showed the mind-set of Greek philosophy (see Acts 17). His intellectually curious audience asked about “this new doctrine, ... for thou bringest ... strange things to our ears” (Acts 17:19–20). Then when Paul spoke of the living God and the Resurrection, he was “mocked” (Acts 17:32) for seeming to set “forth ... strange gods” (Acts 17:18; see also Acts 17:29).

Some defined matter as intrinsically evil, an idea representing both Greek and Oriental thought (see E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1965, p. 14). Hence, if the body constitutes a “dark jail” from which we should seek to escape, why desire a resurrection? (see *ibid.*, p. 30, note 1). This view contrasts so sharply with modern revelation, which declares that only when the resurrected body and the individual spirit are inseparably connected can there be a “fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33; see also D&C 88:15–16; D&C 138:17). Besides, God used matter to create this earth so it could “be inhabited,” after which He “saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good”—not evil! (Isa. 45:18; Gen. 1:31).

Furthermore, some questioned worshipping a God who suffers. One modern scholar observed that “the human sufferings of Jesus ... were felt as an embarrassment in the face of pagan criticism” (Dodds, p. 119). Thus many Greeks considered Christ and what He stood for as “foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Many fell away from the gospel and its “plain and precious” truths (1 Ne. 13:40). It was too simple. They preferred “looking beyond the mark” and searching for things “they could not understand” (Jacob 4:14).

The Apostle John denounced anti-Christes who taught that Jesus hadn’t really come “in the flesh” (1 Jn. 4:3), implying that Jesus’ bodily appearance was an illusion designed to accommodate mortal incapacities (see John 1:1–3, 14).

Another hellenistic form of “looking beyond the mark” was interpreting clear, historical events as allegorical. These early denials of Jesus’ historicity are replicated in our day.

Reason, the Greek philosophical tradition, dominated, then supplanted, reliance on revelation, an outcome probably hastened by well-intentioned Christians wishing to bring their beliefs into the mainstream of contemporary culture.

Historian Will Durant also wrote: “Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life” (Caesar and Christ, p. 595).

Unfortunately, too many Church members, in Paul’s phrase, wearied and fainted “in [their] minds” (Heb. 12:3).

By the middle of the second century, things had changed dramatically. Another scholar wrote of how the theological furniture had been significantly rearranged in ways which reflected a hellenized Christianity (see Stephen Robinson, *Ensign*, Jan. 1988, p. 39).

Peter, who witnessed firsthand what was happening, spoke hopefully of a distant day, the long-awaited “times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21). *Restitution* means *restoration*.

Paul, too, wrote of the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Rom. 11:25; Eph. 1:10), a particular time of times, which would “gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (Eph. 1:10; see also Rom. 11:25). Everything would be restored, including the fulness which was with Adam in the beginning (see D&C 128:21; Abr. 1:3). However, there would never again be a collective falling away, only individual apostasy (see Dan. 2:44; D&C 65:2).

The glorious things restored in the nineteenth century included the calling of a prophet, Joseph Smith, who heard God’s own voice, received angelic revelations and also the holy apostleship and priesthood keys. He also received additional scripture, which commenced a continuing canon and included a restored fulness concerning the nature of God, the Father, and Christ, the Son, and the Atonement. After all, first things first! The Savior, Himself, declared, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

Instructed by further revelation, Joseph Smith taught, “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938, p. 343). Likewise, brothers and sisters, if we do not comprehend God’s purposes, we will not comprehend the purposes of life! In God’s plan of salvation, He does nothing save it be for the benefit of His children in the world; man is at the center of His purposes (see Mosiah 8:18; D&C 46:26; see also Moses 1:39). Likewise restored were doctrines, ordinances, and covenants associated with the holy temple. Revelation thus replaced the long and inordinate reliance on reason. Yet, regarding reason, the invitation of the Lord of the Restoration is “Wherefore, hearken and I will reason with you” (D&C 45:15). Such hearkening enhances and stretches the mind, admitting one to the sun-drenched uplands of revealed understanding. “Come now, and let us reason together” is an invitation to divine tutoring, but only the meek are wise enough to accept it (Isa. 1:18; see also 2 Ne. 32:7).

Even more fulness is to come, which will “reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof” (2 Ne. 27:10; see also D&C 121:28–32).

The “glad tidings” of the Restoration came that faith “might increase in the earth” (D&C 1:21), a refreshing remedy for what Matthew Arnold described:

*The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, ...
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the nightwind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
("Dover Beach")*

While we rightly rejoice over the Restoration, we should also learn from the lessons of the past by honoring God’s patterns of revelation, including the gift of the Holy Ghost by which needed anchoring and personal verification can come.

Let us also honor today’s “sowers of the seed,” the Apostles. Let us be wary about accommodating revealed theology to conventional wisdom. Let us lovingly nourish ourselves, our families, and Church flocks spiritually, so that we are not “wearied and faint in [our] minds” (Heb. 12:3).

Self-siftings do occur. President George Q. Cannon observed in 1875:

“I am thankful that God allows those who do not keep his commandments to fall away, so that his Church may be cleansed, and, in this respect, this Church is different from any other that is upon the earth. ... The sifting or weeding process has been going on from the commencement of this Church until the present time” (in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:84).

In the days ahead, “all things shall be in commotion” (D&C 88:91). We may even have nostalgia for past days of obscurity (see D&C 1:30). Amid a drumroll of developments, complex and converging world conditions will bring both trials and opportunities. Faithful Church members, however, will sense the crescendo in it all, even while being carried forward on the crest of breathtaking circumstances.

He whose name this church bears has promised that He will be in our midst (see D&C 6:32), lead us along (see D&C 78:18), go before us (see D&C 49:27; D&C 84:88), and even fight our battles (see D&C 98:37). He has further counseled, “Be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart ... that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy” (D&C 98:14). So let us have patience and faith as did Lehi who saw pointing fingers of scorn directed at those who grasped the iron rod, which rod, ironically, some of those same fingers once grasped (see 1 Ne. 8:27, 33). But, said Lehi, “we heeded them not.” So it should be with us! Brothers and sisters, being pointed in the right direction, we do not need to worry about being pointed at!

As Latter-day Saints, far from having a doctrinal famine, we do not yet fully sense the soaring comprehensiveness of the Restoration. Provincially, we focus on our own little sectors and their little pieces of gospel tile—without seeing the

breathtaking mosaic of the Restoration! For instance, revealed truths tell of the stunning vastness of God’s work with its plurality of “worlds without number”! (Moses 1:33; see also D&C 76:24). Yet, there is also incredible individualization as in the ordinances and promises of the holy temple.

We can best express our gratitude for this glorious fulness by developing a more full love for all of humankind. And why not, for the Restoration tells us who our neighbors really are! Let our gratitude likewise be expressed by striving to become, attribute by attribute, more and more as Jesus is (see 3 Ne. 27:27). By so living, ours will not then be a mere appreciation of Jesus, nor a modest admiration of Him. Rather, ours will be an adoration of Jesus expressed by our emulation of Him!

I so testify in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen!