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## Introduction: What Went Wrong for the Early Christians?

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## Introduction

# WHAT WENT WRONG FOR THE EARLY CHRISTIANS?

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*Noel B. Reynolds*

When Joseph Smith emerged from the grove in 1820, he had learned first hand from Jesus Christ himself that the Christian churches of his day were all wrong and that he was forbidden to join any of them. “Their creeds were an abomination in his sight,” their “professors were all corrupt,” and they were teaching “for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness,” but denying “the power thereof” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

From that first vision onward, Joseph Smith, and the Latter-day Saints who believed his testimony, understood clearly that the “restoration of all things” was made necessary by the loss of the church established by Jesus Christ during his life upon the earth. These first generation Latter-day Saints were impressed by the rampant confusion and contradictions in the Christian world of their day and tended to see that confusion as sufficient evidence of an apostasy. Israel was scattered and lost. The restoration was necessary to gather Israel and to re-establish the true teachings and church of Jesus Christ in the world.

By the end of the nineteenth century, LDS scholars and leaders had entered a new phase in their understanding of the Christian apostasy by drawing on the findings of modern historians in an attempt to expand their understanding. Protestant historians, who focused on the failings of the Catholic tradition, provided seemingly endless evidences of apostasy in Christian history, justifying the Protestant Reformation in the process. They pointed to the obvious wickedness of late medieval popes and priests. They pointed to the sales of indulgences, a tactic to raise money for the church by selling forgiveness of sins in this world to prevent punishment in the next. Guided by these eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant historians, LDS writers pushed the apostasy farther back in time by focusing on the sins of medieval European Christianity.

Over the last century there has been an outpouring of newly discovered manuscripts, written during the first Christian centuries, that enables us to get a much clearer picture of what the Christian experience was like in those early times. And as our knowledge of these times grows, the apostasy is again pushed back further, even into the first century. Hugh Nibley was the first LDS author to enter this third phase. Relying on the New Testament, the writings of the apostolic fathers, and the pre-1960 secondary literature that deals with this period, Nibley produced a list of forty “variations on a theme,” that theme being that the primitive church would not last long or had already passed away. In this paper prominently published in *Church History*, he presented his extensive collections of references from the early manuscripts to argue persuasively that the earliest Christian leaders did not expect the church to endure and that many of them came even to lament the passing of the original.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See Hugh W. Nibley, “The Passing of the Primitive Church,” in *When the Lights Went Out: Three Studies on the Ancient Apostasy* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 1–47.

Though published in an international journal, Nibley's paper was destined to provide a watershed for LDS scholars, focusing their interest in the apostasy on the later decades of the very first century, from which almost no writings have survived.

In the 1960s, LDS historian Richard L. Bushman observed that LDS students of the apostasy had become too dependent on Protestant and often anti-Catholic writers and challenged us to look at the apostasy afresh. He said that while noting the various changes to the doctrines and to the ordinances is helpful, it is not enough for it does not address the heart or causes of the apostasy, rather focusing on its effects.<sup>2</sup> It is as if you were to approach the aftermath of a car wreck. You can conclude from the debris, the twisted metal frame, the shattered glass, the injured and dead bodies, that an accident has occurred. But you would not say that the broken and scattered parts, the injured and dead bodies, and the twisted frame caused the accident. Although evidence of the accident, they are only its results. Likewise, all the doctrinal changes, the subsequent corruption, the centuries of religious strife and schism may constitute good evidence that an apostasy occurred but may not be the causes of that apostasy.

As James Faulconer explains in "The Concept of Apostasy in the New Testament," the Greek term *apostasia*, as used in the New Testament, means rebellion. It was often used in classical Greek to indicate a military rebellion or coup in which traditional bonds of loyalty to a particular leadership are rejected. Thus, *apostasia* specifically refers to internal problems. Joseph Smith and Brigham Young both recognized this when they said that no force on this earth could destroy the church

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2. Richard L. Bushman, review of Milton V. Backman, *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*, in *BYU Studies* 7/2 (1966): 161–64.

from without.<sup>3</sup> In so doing they were echoing the principle articulated by the angel who appeared to young Alma saying: “Alma, arise and stand forth, for why persecutest thou the church of God? For the Lord hath said: *This is my church*, and I will establish it; and nothing shall overthrow it, save it is the transgression of my people” (Mosiah 27:13).<sup>4</sup>

In the Old Testament, apostasy or rebellion against God consisted specifically in the breaking of covenants that men had made with Jehovah. The Lord warned Moses, “You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and *break the covenant* I made with them. On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them” (Deuteronomy 31:16 NIV). The Greek word used here is *apostasion*, meaning “little rebellion” or “little apostasy,” and specifically indicates divorce, or breaking of the marriage covenant. The Lord repeatedly likened his covenant with Israel to the covenant of marriage, and apostasy from that covenant was likened to adultery. We might expect, therefore, that the demise of the early Christian church was also a result of internal developments—breaking of covenants—and not something imposed from the outside.

LDS scholars today conclude increasingly that the root causes of the apostasy were the abandonment or breaking of

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3. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:145.

4. Captain Moroni appears to invoke this principle when he tells Zerahemnah that “never will the Lord suffer that we shall be destroyed except we should fall into transgression and deny our faith” (Alma 44:4). He later explained to the whole people, “Surely God shall not suffer that we, who are despised because we take upon us the name of Christ, shall be trodden down and destroyed, until we bring it upon us by our own transgressions” (Alma 46:18).

sacred covenants by the Christians themselves. The more we learn about the first decades after the passing of Christ, the more we can see internal rebellion against God's covenants and against his authorized servants—much like the rebellions against Moses in the wilderness, or against Joseph Smith in Kirtland in 1836. The rebels were members of Christ's church, sometimes leaders, who sought for earthly power, glory, and even justification for their own sins. The restoration scriptures give us some key insights: The first section of the Doctrine and Covenants says, "they have strayed from mine ordinances, and *have broken mine everlasting covenant*; They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:15–16).

Thus the Lord describes this apostasy as breaking covenants and straying from his ordinances. The Lord likewise says concerning his disciples during his earthly ministry, "My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened" (D&C 64:8). Thus, we see that apostasy involves breaking God's covenants, turning from him to idols and things of this world, and not repenting of our sins, which is of course the most fundamental thing we have covenanted to do.

The scriptures of the restoration make it clear that ordinances such as baptism, priesthood ordination, and marriage are all based in covenants between men and God. Those receiving the ordinance have made certain covenants with God to turn away from their sins and obey his commandments, and God in turn makes promises to them. The ordinance provides a

public witness of these covenants.<sup>5</sup> What we had not previously realized is that when the second-century Christians redefined these ordinances as *sacraments*, they had already abandoned their covenantal understanding of the ordinances. There were significant efforts by some key thinkers in the Protestant Reformation to restore those covenantal understandings to the ordinances, but these all failed. Reinvented as sacraments, the ordinances were understood in traditional Christianity as the means by which God could bless a person with an infusion of divine grace, through the mediation of the priest. Once the covenantal understanding was lost, it made sense to bless everyone possible. So how could traditional Christianity deny baptism to infants if the recipient no longer was expected to be making a meaningful covenant in connection with that ordinance? A similar analysis applies to Christian sacraments such as last rites. This helps us understand what Nephi meant when he explained the apostasy by saying that “many covenants of the Lord have they taken away” (1 Nephi 13:26).

This volume of essays reports new research by several LDS scholars in different fields which we hope will be useful in helping Latter-day Saints understand the apostasy better. The authors identify several common myths and misconceptions that Latter-day Saints have about the apostasy and help us understand the falling away from Christ’s church more accurately and completely. They argue that the Christian apostasy occurred sometime during the first century—or before

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5. This is summarized simply by Alma at the waters of Mormon when he asks the new converts, “what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?” (Mosiah 18:10).

AD 100. Traditional Christianity, as we know it, was not established until the Nicene Council in AD 325, or during the fourth century. This volume is designed to support and encourage further systematic research on this topic. It is not designed to be a comprehensive or final treatment of any of these issues. The goals of the authors and editor will be achieved if Latter-day Saints find its contents helpful for understanding this important topic and if it provokes some of them to pursue these and related questions with further research.

**Myth #1: The apostasy happened because of outside persecution.**

Both the Bible and the writings of early Christians extensively document internal divisions that were a major problem within the first-century church. Paul's first epistle to the church in Corinth (AD 55) lists several schismatic developments in the Corinthian branch: "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:11–13). Paul marvels at how quickly the Galatian Saints have "turned from the gospel" (Galatians 1:6–8). Paul's second epistle to the church in Corinth mentions false apostles whom Paul describes as "ministers" of Satan (2 Corinthians 11:13–15). In his second epistle to Timothy (AD 65), Paul laments that all Asia is "turned away" (2 Timothy 1:15). In his letter to Gaius, John reports that in one unnamed branch of the church, the leader Diotrophes, would have nothing to do with John and his brethren. Not only did this local leader refuse to accept John's emissaries, but he opposed those who did



want to accept them and puts them “out of the church” (3 John 1:9–10). In the book of Revelation, John writes inspired letters to seven of the churches in Asia, calling them to repentance for the most egregious of sins (Revelation 2–3). Any stake president or bishop receiving one of these letters today would know that he and his members were way out of line and probably scheduled for church disciplinary action.

Virtually every epistle in the New Testament bears witness to divisions and rebellions in the church, though like most Christians, Latter-day Saints do not usually read the text with that in mind. We tend to see these as calls to repentance and assume that they were probably effective. But should we assume that they were effective? The apparent collapse of the church in the first century suggests that in the final analysis, they were not. When the second century opens, we are confronted with clear evidence of a growing variety of competing versions of Christianity, and the original structure of priesthood leadership has disappeared. All that remain are city leaders, still *known* as bishops, but *not called or supported* by a central structure under the direction of prophets or apostles. In his letters to the churches in Greece, Clement, bishop of Rome during the last few years of the first century, urged the saints to repent of their jealousies and divisiveness. Ignatius, a bishop in Antioch who was martyred around AD 115, warned of many of the same things.

These kinds of divisions and internal problems are not unknown to Latter-day Saints. Think of the Kirtland period and the rampant and recurring apostasy and opposition to Joseph Smith’s leadership. In many ways, the early Christian church seems never to have transcended its “Kirtland period.” The Latter-day restoration did transcend these early apostasies by the strength of its prophet and the loyal apostles that stood

with him before and after his death. In early June of 2004, President Gordon B. Hinckley was in England and reminded his audience there how the restoration had been in deep trouble in Kirtland, and then again in Nauvoo. He then explained how the flood of faithful new converts from England was crucial in helping the church to survive those crises.<sup>6</sup> Since those difficult days, the church has benefited from higher and higher levels of unity and loyalty among its members, so that today we can hardly understand the challenges of internal strife that characterized much of our early church history.

But even today, new branches of the church with inexperienced members and leaders sometimes appear to recapitulate these earlier problems. It is not that unusual in that immature stage of development to see petty jealousies, small offenses, position seeking, and violation of the commandments threatening to wreck the church from within. But in spite of this, the unity and faithfulness of the church in this last dispensation has continued to grow. As the Prophet Joseph said, “No unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”<sup>7</sup> While Joseph recognized that all previous dispensations of the gospel had ended in apostasy, he had learned through revelations and visions that this last dispensation would succeed and would prepare a people

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6. “Little Chapel’s Keys Returned to Church” *LDS Church News*, 5 June 2004, 3.

7. *History of the Church*, 4:540.

who could welcome the Savior at his second coming and establish the foundation of his millennial reign.

**Myth 2: The apostasy was caused by the hellenization of Christianity or the incorporation of Greek philosophy and culture into the teachings of the early church.**

The world in which Jesus established his church was full of pagan superstitions and excesses. But the educated and ruling classes of the Roman empire—who had been thoroughly hellenized over the preceding few centuries—put their trust in the teachings of the Greek philosophers who discouraged religious superstition and challenged men to become virtuous by living up to universally recognized standards of good human conduct. While the Christians found much that was admirable in that stance, they could not accept the philosophers' rejection of the gods or their claims to be able to make men good through their own self-discipline alone. The Christians recognized that without the atonement of Jesus Christ and the guiding and purifying effect of the Spirit in their lives, men could not become truly good. Paul warned the saints: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8, NIV). This, however, is the only explicit reference to philosophy in the New Testament, suggesting that it was far from being Paul's major concern with the first-century saints.

The main mistake in assuming that Greek philosophy was a principal *cause* of the apostasy is that the chronology is off by a whole century. The first Christian writer to know and use philosophy extensively was Justin Martyr, who wrote in the second quarter of the second century, by which time the apostles were long dead, the priesthood gone, and the ordinances

transformed. The apostasy was already in full swing. And even this first Christian philosopher was not encouraging the adoption of philosophical teachings in the church. Rather, he used his philosophical training principally to defend Christians before the ruling classes of Rome. He pointed out to them the virtues of Christians in terms that made them sound a lot like the Stoics and the Epicureans and that definitely distinguished Christian worship from the superstitious and orgiastic practices of the popular religions of the day.

At the end of the second and during the third century, however, in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, a new way of using Greek philosophy arose. Men like Clement of Alexandria, his star pupil Origen, and later Athanasius began to use elements of Greek philosophy to articulate and develop Christian doctrine. Clement wrote “Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring ‘the Hellenic mind,’ as the [law of Moses brought] the Hebrews, ‘to Christ.’”<sup>8</sup> Philosophy and reason were not deemed superior to revelation by Clement and Origen, but they did provide another fully reliable source of truth. For them, the Greek philosophical tradition was a rich resource for all who wanted to defend, establish, or develop Christian doctrine. The result of such efforts over the following centuries was a new Christianity that had been thoroughly hellenized.

Not all third-century Christians were comfortable with the fast-moving shift to philosophical discourse in Christian dialogue. Clement’s contemporary Tertullian challenged this

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8. Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.5 (alluding to Galatians 3:24), in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *ANF*), ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:305.

new trend and asked, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians . . . ? Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!”<sup>9</sup> Tertullian and some other writers and leaders saw the essential differences and antipathy between the Greek rhetorical style that seeks to uncover absolute, unchanging truths about the universe, and the Judaic-Christian tradition that believes in revelation and finds the grounds of truth and right in historical events of great religious significance.

But, already in apostasy, the third-century Christians were in deep trouble. Official persecutions were increasing. They were plagued by a rapidly multiplying diversity of Christian doctrines and sects—each claiming to be the true heir of Christ and the apostles. There was no central leadership to help them distinguish between the true and the false. They needed some universal standard and authority to which they could agree and by which they could divide true and false Christianity—the orthodox from the heretical. Threatened with the utter demise of Christianity, they turned to the well established and widely admired principles of Greek philosophy for a solution. Even Protestant historians, who used to criticize the hellenization of the early churches, now recognize that the Christian movement would have dwindled into an insignificant folk religion without the infusion of Greek thought.<sup>10</sup> Soon, the third-century Christian thinkers came to share Clement’s appreciation for the work of Plato and his successors. They even went so far

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9. Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 7 (ANF 3:246).

10. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 39.

as to claim, echoing Origen, that God had sent the Greeks to prepare the systems of thought that would bring Christianity to its divinely intended completion. The fullness of Christian doctrine and understanding could only occur as the teachings of Christ and the apostles were united with the teachings of Plato and the other Greek philosophers. The Nicene Council of AD 325 and other later councils officially incorporated this approach and issued creeds that have been used to distinguish the orthodox from the heretical from that day to this. And this explains why the Christian world today is not willing to see the Latter-day Saints—or any other believers in Christ who refuse to accept the creeds of the councils—as Christians.

The most aggressive developments of Christian thought in the Greek mold during the fourth century took place in Asia Minor and the churches there. The great Cappadocian theologians, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, used their philosophical training—received to a significant extent in the schools of Athens—to refine and elaborate the meaning of the Nicene Creed and to formulate the orthodox Christian teaching that produced the final defeat of Arianism at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. While many Christian writers have insisted that this newly established “orthodox theology” was always implicit in Christian teaching, more recent scholars are more inclined to acknowledge that it was an essential, if late invention that did succeed in pulling the splintered Christian movement together.

This new use of philosophy was accompanied by a subtle shift in Christian thinking. Consider the first-century declarations of John and Peter: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3); “And we are witnesses of all things which

he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:39–41).

These are declarations of fact, knowledge, and eye-witness accounts. They say that they have seen and heard, and they bear testimony. Compare these to the philosophical declarations that the church produced during the fifth century. The Athanasian creed reflects Augustine’s theology and focuses on the definition of the nature of God: “the Son of God, is God and man; God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of his mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect man, of a rational soul and human flesh subsisting.”<sup>11</sup> Though the incorporation of Greek philosophy into Christianity was not an original cause of the apostasy, the apostate Christian churches generally reached out to embrace philosophy as a means of bringing common standards and rationality to Christian belief. It is widely recognized today by Christian historians that the apostate Christian churches saved the Christian tradition by so doing. But the Christian tradition that resulted was far different than the one established by Jesus Christ and his apostles in the first century. And this fact has also been repeatedly recognized by Christian scholars.<sup>12</sup>

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11. “The Athanasian Creed,” in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches* (New York: Harper, 1919), 2:68–69.

12. See, for example, David W. Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up: A New Look at Today’s Evangelical Church in the Light of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Henderson, TX: Scroll, 1999), in which an evangelical Protestant lawyer reports years of research in the earliest Christian writings and bemoans how much Christian belief and practice have changed.

The essential partnership of Greek philosophy and the Christian church has been recognized and even celebrated in many ways. One of the most striking is the Signature Room in the Vatican Museum which boasts one of the most important works of Raphael and was painted in 1510–1511. The entire surface of the large room is covered with murals. The two largest murals face one another. One is the “Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament” which depicts the Catholic Church on earth, the saints in heaven, the holy family, and the godhead—all focused on an empty sacrament table, with the disputants ranged on each end. The other is the “School of Athens,” which depicts Plato and Aristotle in deep conversation in a classical peripatetic situation. Also portrayed are a number of other famous philosophers and scientists from ancient times engaged in conversations or reflections and distributed on the steps and porches. Raphael’s juxtaposition of these sensational murals has evoked considerable scholarly commentary, but few viewers need help to recognize the endorsement of both revelation and reason as avenues to truth and the inclusion of the Hellenistic philosophy in the larger Christian tradition (see frontispiece).

**Myth 3: The Roman Catholic Church specifically is the great and abominable church spoken of in Nephi’s vision.**

Given the dependence of the early LDS writers on Protestant historians, who were themselves often anti-Catholic in orientation, it is not surprising that Latter-day Saints tended to interpret Nephi’s vision in this way.<sup>13</sup> The Protestant focus on the corruption in medieval Christianity naturally suggested

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13. See the report of the vision in 1 Nephi 13:14–29; 14:3–17 and Nephi’s elaborations and interpretations of the vision in 1 Nephi 22:13–15, 22–23; 2 Nephi 26:21–22; 28:3–32; 30:1–2.



the Catholic Church as the “church of the devil” described by Nephi in his vision. But if we look more closely at these scriptures, we will see that the church of the devil arose centuries before the Catholic Church was established with Rome as its acknowledged head, and we will see that it includes much more than just one such organization. There is much more to it.

In the vision, Nephi saw that the great and abominable church was formed in the first century when the record of the Jews went forth from the Jews to the Gentiles (1 Nephi 13:25–26), and that it was founded in opposition to the Church of God—which tells us that the two existed simultaneously (1 Nephi 13:5). Nephi saw further that the devil’s church took away many parts of the gospel, including the covenants, as verse 26 tells us, and later took away many precious things out of the Bible (v. 28). In the first century, the Christian scriptures consisted of the Old Testament, available principally in a Greek translation called the Septuagint. And there was no canonical version of these pre-Christian texts until after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. A few years ago I had a personal experience that confirmed Nephi’s account in a dramatic way. I was a guest of the director of the Vatican Library in Rome, and he brought out their fourth century copy of the complete Greek Bible for me to see—*Codex Vaticanus B*. The first page we looked at had numerous erasures, additions, and changes written right on the page in different inks and different hands I asked, pointing to some of these, “What is that?” The reply: “Oh, that’s where they made corrections.” Over the last two decades, many New Testament scholars have argued convincingly that the final versions of the gospels, and the epistles that were eventually canonized, took shape during a long period in which they were modified as necessary to support

the emerging theological orthodoxy among the leaders of the Christian churches.<sup>14</sup> Nor did this process of change go unnoticed in those early centuries. In “The Corruption of Scripture in Early Christianity,” John Gee cites convincing evidence from the early Christian writings that they believed the scriptures had been altered or twisted in many ways. Paul warned the Thessalonians that some people might try to stir them up with forged apostolic epistles. Peter said that many in his day were already “wresting” the scriptures, or distorting their true meaning (2 Peter 3:15–16). Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop who was martyred around AD 110, said that he could not write down all of the teachings of the apostles because they were too sacred. Justin Martyr, whom we mentioned before, accused Jewish leaders of deliberately removing passages from the Old Testament. During the second century, many bishops and writers in the church accused “heretics” of changing the scriptures. Tertullian of Carthage claimed that Marcion, a church leader in what is now Turkey, deliberately cut out pieces of the scriptures that he did not like, and Clement of Alexandria accused some people of rewriting parts of the Gospels. By the third century, the accusations of changes in the scriptures die down. However, we have virtually no texts predating the third century by which to measure the changes. Less than one percent of the surviving New Testament fragments can be dated before the third century, and those are mere fragments. We also have other writings, letters primarily, from the second century which quote

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14. See, e.g., Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

scriptures, and these quotations frequently differ from what we have in the New Testament today.

Nephi lists several identifying features of the church of the devil (1 Nephi 13:4–9). He says they will torture and slay the saints (v. 5). They will bind down the people with yokes of iron (v. 5), which recalls Joseph Smith’s comparison of creeds to iron yokes (D&C 123:7–8). Nephi also tells us that this church was founded by the devil, followed materialistic pursuits, and sought worldly praise. He further tells us that there are only two churches, the church of God, and the church of the devil, which is the great and abominable church. It seems, then, that Nephi did not have a specific ecclesiastical organization in mind, but rather he was describing all organizations (for that is the original meaning of the word church, or *ekklesia*, in Greek) that sought worldly rewards and opposed the saints of God. It almost seems like the central, energizing, and coordinating headquarters of this church is in some invisible world.

In summing up the constituents of this evil church, Nephi later says, “For the time speedily shall come that all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake; they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet” (1 Nephi 22:23). For notwithstanding the power of the devil and his church to blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men through temptations and by taking away precious parts of the scriptures and the covenants (see 1 Nephi 12:17; 13:27), the Lord’s work will triumph in the

last days as he pours out his wrath on the great and abominable church (1 Nephi 14:7–15) and as he sends down protecting power like fire from heaven on his saints wherever they might be scattered and threatened in the nations of the earth (1 Nephi 14:14, 17). Finally, Jacob quotes the Lord God in making it perfectly clear that it is the conduct of individuals that makes them members of the church of the devil. “Wherefore, he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; for they are they who are the whore of all the earth; for they who are not for me are against me, saith our God” (2 Nephi 10:16).

Furthermore, as Nephi tells us later, many people throughout the ages preceding the restoration and the second coming would be true, humble followers of Christ who erred only because of their leaders (2 Nephi 28:14). We know further that the Spirit continued to strive with men and that some men were inspired. Nephi said of Columbus that he was inspired by God. Joseph Smith, when he read Foxe’s *Book of the Martyrs* which records all those who have died for the faith from the early apostles to the Protestant movements, said that many of these people were true disciples who would receive salvation. President John Taylor said in 1873, “There were men in those dark ages who could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world . . . have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world.”<sup>15</sup> But none of these were called to restore Christ’s church. That would wait until 1820. As the Prophet Joseph Smith revealed in these latter days, all those who died without knowing the gospel, who would have embraced it and lived it had they had the chance, will be heirs of the celestial kingdom (D&C 137:7).

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15. *Journal of Discourses*, 16:197.

## **Summary of the Contents of This Book**

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the topic as it has developed in recent years and summaries of the eight main chapters. These chapters represent a variety of different disciplinary approaches and even different interpretations of the apostasy itself. Some focus on scripture, others on recent scholarship. They all represent new thinking on Christian apostasy.

Part One of the volume introduces the conceptions of Christian apostasy that have dominated the writings of Latter-day Saints. Richard Bennett and Amber Seidel have surveyed the wide range of early Mormon preaching and missionary publications to ascertain how the Christian apostasy was understood and discussed in the first years of the restoration. While Joseph Smith's accounts of his first vision clearly indicate that he was personally concerned about the confusing and conflicting claims of the Protestant churches in his area, he was not prepared for the sweeping revelation that none of them was the true church of Christ. Like Joseph, the early members understood the apostasy largely in terms of the evident confusions and strife in the contemporary Christian world of their own immediate experience. But they also saw the scattering of Israel as evidence of God's rejection of his covenant peoples for their various apostasies, and the restoration, and the gathering it would inspire, as the divine remedy for it. The focus on the loss of priesthood authority and lost doctrines would develop much later.

Eric Dursteler's chapter examines the roots of the conceptions of the Christian apostasy accepted in the LDS community over the last century. He explains how the formative writings of B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith derived directly from the scholarship of nineteenth-century Protestant historians and eighteenth-century anti-clerical

writings. Roberts set the pattern while drawing heavily on Johann Mosheim, who drew in turn on Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt and his English counterpart, John Addington. This reliance on pro-Enlightenment and pro-Protestant writers produced a heavy emphasis in LDS accounts of the apostasy on the late medieval corruption of the Catholic Church—describing it as a time of severe spiritual darkness and intellectual and cultural backwardness. Dursteler then discusses the lack of support for this emphasis and portrayal in both the scriptures and in more recent academic research, thus signaling the need for twenty-first century Latter-day Saints to rethink the apostasy and its origins.

John Welch examines selected restoration scriptures as a means of reconstructing key elements of the prophetic views of the apostasy, providing a guide to our own further research on this topic. He finds in D&C 64:8 frequently overlooked evidence that the Christian apostasy may have occurred quite early due to unresolved conflicts between the disciples. His detailed analysis of 1 Nephi 13 shows that Jewish persecution of the disciples would contribute to their demise. He further identifies scriptural stages by which the great and abominable church would remove key doctrines and covenants and then alter the scriptures. Welch then turns his principal attention to the parable of the wheat and tares in D&C 86 as a prophecy of the apostasy. Welch concludes that this version of the parable, as revealed to Joseph Smith, is probably the original. In contrast with the softer versions in Matthew 13:24–30 and elsewhere, D&C 86 leaves no room to believe the early church would survive. Rather, it would be choked out by the tares and driven into the wilderness until there would be a new planting before the final harvest. Through all these scriptures, Welch notes, however, that in concord with 1 Nephi 13, there is no

reason to conclude that there would be no saints, or righteous followers of Christ during the period of apostasy—only that the church as Christ’s appointed institution would be lost.

James Faulconer discusses what the New Testament writers thought about the apostasy and what was meant by the term *apostasy* and related terminology during New Testament times. He argues that apostasy meant rebellion and was not the same as heresy or sin. Most specifically, apostasy—at least for the writers of the New Testament and their contemporaries—was the rejection of temple and priesthood. Apostasy arises from what one does or does not do, rather than what one believes or teaches. The concern with orthodoxy and heterodoxy comes only later, and thus is a symptom of the apostasy.

In Part Two, five scholars focus their investigations on different important features of apostate teachings or practices in the early Christian centuries. John Gee documents the evidence that many plain and precious things were taken away from the scriptures, as Nephi had foreseen (1 Nephi 13:28). While a great deal of scholarly attention has been focused in recent decades on the ways in which the New Testament writings were affected by theological politics in the third and fourth centuries,<sup>16</sup> as the Christian canon gradually took shape, Gee focuses on the second century to document the extensive changing of the inspired writings that was already in process. He points first to the widely repeated claims that Christians have made significant changes to those writings. And he also points out how many of the quotations from these writings in the first and second centuries do not match up with the New Testament that emerged a century later. Further, there are no surviving copies of their writings about scripture that can be

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16. See, e.g., Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.

dated before the third century. The earlier copies, and any differences they might have preserved, have mostly disappeared.

Latter-day Saints will find in their own history numerous incidents that might illuminate the processes by which the inspired writings can be changed. Joseph Smith once publicly accused Oliver Cowdery of trying to revise his revelations.<sup>17</sup> James V. Strang forged documents justifying him in his quest for power in the church.<sup>18</sup> John C. Bennett and others, including modern polygamists, have pretended revelations to justify their conduct, including claimed letters of authorization from John Taylor or Wilford Woodruff.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Mark Hofmann forged many documents, including one that justified Joseph Smith III's claims to lead the church, which was then used extensively by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now known as the Community of Christ). And even with the best of intentions, the scribes, copyists, and editors of the Book of Mormon over the last 173 years have both with and without intention introduced a significant number of changes into that text, many of which make a difference in how it would be translated into another language.<sup>20</sup>

Daniel Graham and James Siebach address the widespread misunderstanding that the apostasy was caused by the incorporation of Hellenistic (Greek) thought into the Christian church. Like Reynolds (see below), they see the hellenization of Christianity as a result of the apostasy, and not its cause. Their detailed account of the rise of Christian philosophical

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17. *History of the Church*, 1:105.

18. See *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:429–30; *History of the Church*, 7:574.

19. See *History of the Church*, 5:42.

20. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004).



thought shows in detail that it did not become a force in the church until the third century, at least a hundred years after the original church had splintered into dozens of different movements with widely differing teachings and organizations, none of which bore the unadulterated stamp of the original. In the process, these authors provide us with a valuable road map for understanding the Hellenistic transformations of Christianity in its first five centuries.

Joseph Smith's teaching that God has a body contradicts the teachings of all Christian churches today. David Paulsen draws from three of his previously published articles to show that in the first and second Christian centuries, both Jews and Christians generally believed that God was embodied. Philo was a lone exception in the Jewish community in Alexandria, as he promoted a Platonized Judaism. It was not until the end of the second century that Clement of Alexandria and his student Origen promoted the idea of an incorporeal God to the Christian community. Paulsen documents his conclusions by extensive quotations from early writers who candidly noted the common Jewish and Christian belief in an embodied God. Even as late as the fifth century, Augustine explained his initial revulsion toward Christianity as a reaction to this "vulgar" view. His conversion became possible when hellenized Christians helped him see how the emerging Christian theology supported the idea of an incorporeal deity.

As part of an ongoing interest in covenant, Noel Reynolds examines the second-century transformation of covenant-based ordinances into Christian sacraments as a principle cause of the apostasy, and thereby illuminates Nephi's statement that many of the covenants were taken away (1 Nephi 13:26). Once the emphasis on history as the source of religious truth lost its relevance (covenants take place in time and space and shape the moral world of all participants thereafter), the

Christians turned to Greek philosophy, which derived moral and intellectual structure from rational reflections on nature. Like the Jews and early Christians, Mormons take the historical approach of a covenant people. As Christianity abandoned this traditional emphasis on covenant, it needed stable grounding and imported Greek thought and culture by developing a new reliance on philosophical theology.

In addition to these chapters, we have included four appendixes that will provide a variety of reference materials for readers who may wish to pursue their study of the apostasy further. In the first appendix, Barry Bickmore lists and describes many of the Christian writers and writings that are important for an understanding of the apostasy. Adam Bentley assisted Bickmore in assembling the second appendix, which presents a concise survey of the Christian councils that shaped Christian teachings and practice over the centuries. This is followed in a third appendix with the evidences for apostasy in the first Christian decades that are found in the New Testament itself, as identified and explained by Reynolds. Finally Ryan Christensen provides us with a bibliographical essay that provides both descriptions and brief critiques of significant Latter-day Saint writings on the apostasy.

These chapters take a variety of different approaches. All, however, are committed to the reality of the apostasy and to its importance as a subject. The great apostasy was a profoundly formative event in sacred history, and an anomaly. When the Lord did not replace the apostles in ancient Palestine, he broke the pattern he had been following for thousands of years. Every previous dispensation came on the heels of one that preceded it, and faithful remnants from the last dispensation were always still alive when the new dispensation began. When Enoch was called as a prophet, Adam was still alive; when Abraham was called, Melchizedek was still alive; when Moses was called,

Jethro was still alive. Even though—or because—the world was in apostasy, the Lord revealed his gospel and renewed his means of salvation for a new generation of his children. Not so when the church rejected his apostles. The Lord removed the apostles from among them, severed the lines of revelation, and the purity of worship and doctrine did not long remain. Israel was finally and conclusively cut off from the Lord and scattered to the nations. But even this tragic development can be seen in retrospect as the means by which the Lord prepared the Gentile nations for their turn to be first.

This, then, is the great difference between the first Christian apostasy and the many other apostasies—it did not consist only in widespread rejection of God, but was accompanied by the disastrous loss of priesthood authority. Why was there an apostasy? How did it come about? What does it mean? What is the significance of new discoveries on the study of the apostasy? These are among the questions discussed in this book, and which we hope will be given new life with these essays.

Just as this book is not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the explanations and explorations it contains are not intended to be official or final in any way. Some of the chapters included in this volume present snapshots of ongoing research. Others identify and recommend questions that will require further examination. The contents have generally been improved by dialogue among the various authors and other colleagues, and it is my hope that this volume will stimulate and support a new beginning to a much broader conversation.

## **Conclusion**

The confusion and competition that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries observed in the Christian world continues

to this day. A few years ago, spokesmen from a broad range of Christian churches met to lament this scandal of a divided Christian world and to assess the continuing barriers to unity. They recognized that the half-century of ecumenical efforts inspired by the organization of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and earlier reunification movements had failed, deteriorating into little more than local interfaith discussion groups and joint humanitarian efforts, most of which had been co-opted by the liberal wings of their churches. The mergers that have occurred in recent decades have been motivated more by declining membership and financial weakness than from reconciliations of differences in doctrines or practices. And we appear today to be on the brink of a new rash of divisions as mainline Protestant churches fail to resolve internal differences about the ordination of women or the status of homosexuals.

What is striking in this discussion, for a Latter-day Saint looking on, is the widespread agreement among conservative Christians of all stripes on the following two propositions: (1) there has long been a widespread apostasy from the true Christianity, and (2) the true church cannot be divided up; its doctrines are not disposable; and compromise between warring factions cannot lead to truth. Where they all disagree with each other is over the specific forms of apostasy, and over which churches are apostate, and which are not. The prospects of a united Christian world are so faint that one symposium participant mused, we will not likely make any progress until God sends us a solution from heaven. And then he noted ironically, if such divine aid were to come, it might be in just as unlikely and unrecognizable a form as a babe being born in a manger.<sup>21</sup>

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21. See Robert P. George, "The Divisions We Must Sustain: Cultural Division and Christian Unity," in *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (July/August 2003): 51.

Studying the apostasy can help Latter-day Saints understand and appreciate the restoration even more. But there is also a lesson here that can benefit each one of us. As individuals, we must carefully keep our covenants, or we will lose the guidance of the Spirit and fall into apostasy ourselves. Further, we must teach this lesson to our children. Religious leaders usually understand that their movements are never more than one generation away from extinction. In each new generation, each individual member needs to be converted, to repent and make a covenant of obedience to the Father, and to grow in faithfulness in his service.

As contributing authors to this volume, we are grateful for the testimonies we have each received that the true church of Jesus Christ has been restored through the prophet Joseph Smith. As our understanding of the apostasy grows, so does our appreciation for the importance of the fact that both the Father and the Son, and then numerous angels came to him. By these means the long-lost priesthood of God has been restored. Lost scriptures have been translated and published. The kinds of historical inquiries and reflections presented in this book help make it clear that we are the most blessed of all peoples to live in a day when we can be led by a prophet, when the Church of Christ is solidly established throughout so much of the earth, when we have so many scriptures and revelations, and when we have temples in which the culminating ordinances of the plan of salvation can be administered. It is that testimony that drives our hope that others will discover the truth and importance of that restoration in their lives and for their eternal welfare.