

ON THE APOSTACY.

What is succession a succession of?

I PROPOSE saying a few words on the very solemn subject of the Apostacy of the Dispensation; suggesting the scriptural statements concerning it, rather than making any comment.

This subject has been touched upon connected with the calling of St. Paul, with the raising up of an extraordinary messenger of grace upon Israel's rejection of the testimony of the Holy Ghost to the exalted Jesus. I purpose to advert now to the positive scriptural evidence of the Apostacy; and I will merely retrace, with some additional circumstances, the previous point, which declared its Apostacy in its first or Jewish organization. The scriptures I would now refer to, are in evidence of the plain fact of direct ecclesiastical Apostacy, the revealed existence of that which determined the fate of the dispensation.

The rejection of the Lord Jesus really crowned the sin of the Jewish people—of man; but on the cross the Lord interposed by intercession, saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do;" and to this expression of the gracious and blessed mind of the Lord, the Holy Ghost replies, when by the mouth of Peter he says, "and now brethren I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers; repent ye therefore." That is, the Holy Ghost now bore testimony to the exaltation of Jesus to give *repentance* to Israel and remission of sins. Hence all the testimony of Peter is to God's exaltation of the rejected Messiah, the Son of man. This testimony, as has been long since observed, was finally rejected in the martyrdom of Stephen; and at this point the Jewish central successional order closed, and Paul, the chief volunteer and agent in carrying the active hatred of, and opposition to, the testimony into effect, is raised up to be a witness of the grace, which in long-suffering overruled it all, and surpassed it all. Thus he was at once a messenger of sovereign grace and of the union of the Church with Christ, to the Gentiles; and the type of the calling of a remnant of the Jews, by this sovereign grace in the latter day: in respect

of one, designating himself the chief of sinners; as regards the second, first called—or *all* long-suffering in him first shewn forth. He was taken into a solitary place of sovereign grace, to show the glory of it to others. The place of the union withal of the Church now with Christ.

To his testimony the Jews scattered every where opposed themselves. They not only refused the testimony themselves, but opposed its being carried to others. Of this Bar-jesus is the remarkable expression, and therefore grace here ceases, and judicial blindness is put on him for a season. As the Apostle expresses it in his meet judgment on them, “forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always, for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.”* This manifestly closed the scene, and many were the sorrowful consequences.

The actings of Satan, by the instrumentality of Jewish principles, now passed away, in corrupting the Church, must be familiar to any one acquainted with the perfect word of God. Human righteousness, ordinances, succession and ceremonial observance of times, connecting spiritual religion with human imagination, form the marked characteristics of this corruption of the truth,—perverting, even in the Apostles’ days, whole houses. Not the only characteristics but the chief in principle. Of other formal ones I might mention tradition and the centralization of religion upon earth, because it was of the earth, instead of the power of the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, now associating all with heaven, Jesus being known only there, by the power of a mission not of man nor by man. But upon this I cannot enlarge here.

But while I have thus cursorily referred to the order and progress of the entire subversion of the first and earliest organization, or proposed organization, of the Church, by the rejection of the testimony on which it was founded, I purpose going a great deal farther as to the extent of statement on this point. And while my references will be very simple, they seem to me to involve a principle of the last possible importance; and while directing the judgment through a deep sense of our present condition, to guide it into freedom, and security from the Apostate snare, now

* The final testimony of this judgment is Acts xxviii. I allude to Bar-jesus merely as the revealed expression of the ultimate ratio or occasion of it.

widely spreading its evil force, of successional ordinances : for if the scriptures plainly testify the Apostacy of the dispensation, that which professes to provide for, and secure its successional continuance, must be a lie of the enemy. This is the point now before us. My evidences of it will be few and simple.

I would clear the point by a few brief explanations of what I mean ; endeavouring, though it be connected with many most interesting subjects, to keep it as simple as possible.

In the first place I would remark, that the responsibility of man, or any set of men under any dispensation of God, is quite distinct from the salvation of any individuals in that dispensation. The confounding of these things renders the apprehension of the dealings of God with man impossible : either the security of the Lord's faithfulness, or the responsibility of man in and by any given economy is lost. Adam was responsible in innocence. His individual salvation stood clearly on other ground. Noah was responsible for the ordering of his house and family, we may say then the world, in holy government. The failure of this, though producing most important results, has nothing to do with Noah's salvation. In a word, if God deals in a process of government *here* for the manifestation of his character, this, and the salvation of individuals while that process is going on, are quite distinct ; though the conduct of the saved may be guided and formed by the dispensation here below.

Nay, so decided is this distinction, it is just where the dispensation entirely fails, that the faithfulness of the saved remnant is most conspicuously manifest. What judge was like Samuel, when Israel failed under that ordering of God's people, and God gave them a king in his anger. Thus Israel as a whole, under the law were put as a dispensation under the responsibility of its observance and nationally failed, though a remnant all through were of God and saved.

Every dispensation has some special deposit, so to speak, entrusted it, by which its fidelity is tried. And, as it seems to me, every one of them will be made good, and God glorified in them in Jesus, on the proved failure of man in every one of them. Thus, not to go to other examples, the law — Israel's failure, with every blessing, had been signal. The dispensation of the Holy Ghost's power, or the manifestation of Christ glorified by the Holy Ghost the Comforter, as against the world which rejected him, has its responsi-

bility too. It is true effectual salvation, and the grounds of it have been more plainly brought out, so that we can more easily appropriate real and eternal privileges to those who are heirs of them, because the Holy Ghost does manifest them, and acting in power, gathers them for Christ for heavenly glory, and this was not true of what preceded it. The proper *manifestation*, if every thing was exactly as it ought to be, was of an elect *nation*, all of whom in any case, were not necessarily saved—not of a Church chosen in Jesus from any and every nation. That was formal and by descent, this by power. But though this be so, it does not take away from the dispensation itself, as a given sphere of the operations of God, in which all was to keep its first estate, a place of responsibility, and a deposit given to it. The greatest strength and very essence of an Apostacy, is to affirm of its Apostate condition, in which it is the special object of judgment, the security which belongs to the elect congregation of God. It was just the ruin of Israel: it is easier if not more fatal in christianity.

Farther, I would remark, that the dispensation is judged on its responsibility, while individuals may be saved by grace. I have farther to add, that, however great the patience, the first departure is fatal, and the ground of judgment, whatever the growth of wickedness into ripeness may be. And, lastly, that the dispensation of the profession of christianity, or the name of Christ, stands in this condition; and that the scripture never recognizes a recovering from such a state, whatever through mercy the “lengthening of tranquillity” may be; for the first failure is departure from God, and proves the existence of evil in the flesh, and the manifestation that man is in question, and that all is gone in principle. As a corroborative fact, it is solemnly interesting to see that the failure has in every instance been immediate on the responsibility’s existing.

Christianity not being a system of formal enactment, and its requirements and powers only of spiritual perception, the evidence of its departure is less palpable, and itself also the object of only spiritual perception. But Israel itself could say “wherein have we despised the Lord,” and wherein should we return; and “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these”—and even disciples say, “Master, behold what goodly stones and buildings are here,” though Israel had broken the covenant, and gone away backwards,

and that from the beginning, and was filling up the measure of her iniquity, that all righteous blood should come upon her. I shall very briefly trace this just now. This dealing of God being on responsibility and in justice, it is according to the professing mass, the body at large or their leaders, that the judgment takes place; the security of the saints being untouched by it. Moreover, the refuge of the saints is out of the system judged, because an untoward generation; and their place of blessing, the dispensation which supervenes on the judgment of that from which they have been delivered. I will add, that knowledge of impending judgments is always adequately afforded to the saints to flee from the wrath to come.

Let us remember that the Lord is "slow to anger;" and that in the midst of outrageous provocations, and himself the subject of much of them—the reproaches of the Lord falling upon him—poor Jeremiah could appeal to God how he had stood in the gap to turn away the indignation from them; till the Lord said to him, "Pray not for this people," and the indignation took its course. For intercession is always the place for him who has the mind of God, to make a way for God's love, till the place for intercession is closed.

If some, attaching every thing to the final salvation of the elect, say if this be not affected by it all the rest is immaterial and curious, and they do not know anything about dispensations; I answer, that the salvation of the elect is not the great end of any Christian's thoughts, but the divine glory; and that God has been pleased to glorify himself and display his character in these dispensations for the instruction of the Church; and that if the Church casts it aside, they are casting aside the instruction which God has afforded of his ways. They are making themselves wise without God, and wiser than he, for he has thought fit for his glory to instruct us in these things. I will take only one example (though there are other remarkable ones, as Noah), because we are morally set on the very same ground by scripture, the history of Israel as the elect nation.

Israel was set at Sinai on the condition of their obedience to the law. This the Apostle assures us did not touch the promise made to Abraham, &c. and that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance as to them nationally. But God glorified himself for all that in all his dealings with them, and they happened to them for ensamples to us on

whom the ends of the ages are come. Obedience to God according to the law, was the ground they were set on. They made the golden calf. Their Apostacy was complete. Long was the patience of God,—various his dealings with them in patient mercy, but the irremediable evil of human nature was there, and displayed itself the rather through it all, until they both rejected the Son in humiliation and refused the testimony of the Holy Ghost to his exaltation at the right hand of power. But then God having thus dealt in vain by these external dealings of testimony on man, recurs to the original sin in which the Apostacy was first shewn, just indeed as all the sins of the human heart, aggravated as they are, are but the evidence of its first and total departure from God—“Have ye served me, O ye house of Israel,” says the Spirit in Stephen, quoting and applying a more ancient testimony, “by the space of 40 years in the wilderness; yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, the star of your god Remphan, images which ye made to worship them, and I will carry you away *beyond Babylon.*” They had consummated it towards Jesus, proving themselves irreconcilable, but the Apostacy was complete in the wilderness, however “long-suffering” God may have been.

“Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off,” says the Apostle to the Gentiles, as taking the place of the branches cut off. That is, the Church as a subject of dispensation here, is subject to the same responsibility as Israel of old; and would be cut off on its failure.

Now I shall proceed to show from scripture, that it is revealed that it would fail; and revealed that it has failed. It is perfectly clear that the doctrine of succession, and the maintenance of grace by succession, if this be so, is an awful departure from the truth of God, founded in falsehood and available only to prop up the character of what God judges as the worst form of evil—departure from what is good.

It is not for me to say what patience God may have, or how He may use the intercession of his people for the protracting the time of mercy—certainly he is perfect in wisdom in this.

It alters it is manifest the whole position of the soul to recognize that we live in an Apostacy hastening to its final

consummation, instead of a Church or dispensation which God is sustaining by his faithfulness of grace.

First then, it is evident that the condition of Apostacy is supposed as to this dispensation, in the passage cited from Rom. xi., and made to depend on *continuing* in God's goodness. There is no promise of revival. It is purely on continuance in God's goodness; making failure as I have said ruinous without hope of recovery. God's goodness, in which they were placed, being departed from by man's evil, God never departs from his own goodness. It might suffice to say that professing Christendom is anything but a continuance in the goodness in which the Church was planted; nay, the true people of God have not continued in it, for had they, such a state of things never would have been; but when it comes, they suffer and are involved in it though they began it not. God's people are scattered and worldly and divided: compare their state with John xvii. and Acts ii. and iv. and the saint that loves Jesus and the Church, will soon recognize the sad difference.

But the testimonies are far more precise than this. First, generally, "as it was in the days of Noe and the days of Lot, so should it be in the day when the Son of man should be revealed." Clearly then there was to be an awful Apostacy before the close, and the state of the Apostacy was the state of the dispensation at the close. Again, "that day shall not come except there be a falling away, an Apostacy first." I say not yet *when*, but before the day come an Apostacy comes. This leaves little room for a day of blessedness between. This to the Apostle's mind was to precede the day of the Lord, an Apostacy, not a period of blessedness. If men say "It has come," I dispute not, but I say then cutting off is the consequence, not restoration,* as we have seen from Rom. xi. And the promise of blessing and revival is unfounded. Though the remnant may be revived and gathered from an evil day.

But there is more than this. "In the last days perilous times shall come, men shall be lovers of their own selves," &c. If this passage be examined, it is a very solemn and express testimony of the Spirit of God, of the return of professed Christendom to a state, such as heathenism was, as described by the Spirit in Rom. i. Here the Spirit speaks not of the heathen world, that in the last days it would be

* And what is succession a succession of?

so ; the Spirit had already proved it was so, but in the last days it would be so of those who had the form of godliness, but denied the power. From *such* they were to turn away.

Again, "ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many Antichrists ; whereby we know that it is the last time." And this note, not by the moral evil of the world, but by Apostacy : "they went out from us," whereby it was proved they were not of us. This proves that the Apostacy had set in in St. John's time, whereby the Christians knew, said he, that it was the last time. Not by infidelity, that might condemn individually, and believers be what they ought, but by Apostacy, that proved the last time should come : not wicked people but Antichrists. For the Spirit spoke expressly, that in the latter times some were to depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils. Not only so. The mystery of iniquity already worked. There was a hindrance to the manifestation of the man of sin, but the principles and mystery of iniquity already worked ; and it was only a hindrance which impeded the awful result, which when removed, the great agent and instrument of this crowning iniquity, every where manifested, was to be revealed, whom the Epiphany of the Lord's presence was to destroy.

The passages I have hitherto cited prove :—

First—The liability of the dispensation to Apostacy, as Rom. xi. itself sufficient to teach the result to those acquainted with human nature.

Others, as I John ii. shew that Antichrists were already come ; whereby Christians knew that it was then the last time, because evil was found to have its worst form and source from the bosom of christianity itself.

The evil itself is characterized in the two epistles to Timothy : first, as departing from the faith, but this it must be observed chiefly in practical points ; and secondly, in the general result of a character analogous to heathenism in its moral evils, but though the power was denied maintaining the form of godliness.

Besides these, we have the testimony from the Thesalonians, that the day of the Lord would not come without an Apostacy coming first ; and that the mystery of iniquity was already then at work.

To these we may add the testimony of the Spirit by Peter,

that scorn of the expectation of the Lord's second coming, would be characteristic of the scoffers of these perilous days.

All these passages concur to show that the result of the dispensation would be "Apostacy," "perilous times," "departure from the faith;" and that the mystery of iniquity, the principles of evil which produced this, were already at work.

The present effects then were different: partly a hidden spirit at work, hindered as yet, in its great public manifestation in satanic power;—partly an open Apostacy, and going out from the saints; too pure then, too assiduously watched over by apostolic vigilance and spiritual power to allow, when assuming an open form of evil, its continuance among the saints; partly, as we shall see, not by going out, but by the creeping in of corrupt men. But, however manifested in present effects, these are but the signs of a principle at work which should be consummated in the man of sin; of a principle which involved the dispensation in Apostacy and excision, whatever the gracious patience of God. A principle then operating, and thereby affording an opportunity to the Apostles to forewarn the Church; and by their authority enabling us to say that the last times were *then come*, though there might be a prolonging of mercy.

This assertion, that the last times were then come, is of all possible importance. There was a moral departure from God in the bosom of christianity. The effects of this might be stayed by the hand of the Apostle, but forced the Apostle to say the last times were come. Theologians may comment on such an expression, and say that the last times mean the times of Messiah. But then the presence of *Messiah* would prove that; but the proof of the last times here is that, after *that*, Antichrists are come: they were characteristically and really the last times of the dispensation. Men had slept; the enemy had sowed tares; and it must be left as it was till judgment, as regards the place it held in the world.

It is admitted, that the present effects and manifestations of the Apostacy, were then different in form and extent from what they will assume when judged. The apostolic energy, and spiritual life in the body of the Church itself on which that energy acted, either cast out the evil or suppressed it; just as the zeal of an untainted Moses rescued Israel from the present effects of the golden calf, and

destroyed the present exhibition of the Apostacy. But it was not the less really come in, though the patience of God was not yet exhausted by the rejection of his Son. And the Apostle was well aware, and the Holy Ghost gives us the expression of his assurance, that it was the presence of the apostolic energy which arrested its display. "I know that after my decease," is the sorrowful testimony of the parting Apostle; as Peter also warned them that false teachers would arise among them. Even in the life time of the devoted Apostle, he had to say, "All seek their own, none the things of Jesus Christ;" a state leaving easy room for the evil and mischief to introduce itself. While men slept, the enemy came and sowed tares.

There remains yet one passage which I have not hitherto quoted, which, as the passage of John has shown us that the last times whatever their prolongation were already come, identifies the objects of the revelation as then existing with those who are objects of judgment at the close, on the Lord's return.

The book of Jude may be taken as the history or revelation of Apostacy. The very commencement of the epistle marks the necessity which attracted the testimony of the Spirit of God. "Beloved, says the Apostle, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you, that ye should earnestly contend for the faith once delivered unto the saints; for there are certain men crept in unawares, who were of old ordained unto this condemnation."

This is most distinct. The evil anticipated by the counsels of God had crept in by the neglect of man already in the days of the Apostles. While men slept the enemy had come and sown tares. This infected the susceptibility of the Church's conscience; "though ye once knew this," says the Apostle, and refers to the excision of the whole body save two, in warning to them: likens the resulting condition of the Church to the angels which kept not their first estate, and to Sodom, and to Gomorrah. He then intimates to them the different, and I would add in some respects progressive, characters of the Apostacy (though the entrance of the succeeding ones does not neutralize the former); natural evil and enmity, religious corruption for gain, and open hostility to the priesthood and royalty of Christ, on the part of the religious teachers of the people—Cain, Balaam, and Core.

Having thus traced the forms and characters of the Apostacy from beginning to end, the Apostle gives us the all-important truth, that what had then already found its way into the Church, was the direct object of the judgment of Christ at his coming, as it had been prophesied from the beginning. The consummation of iniquity, in the Apostacy of the last form of God's goodness previous to the coming of the Son of man in glory. Enoch, we are taught by the Holy Ghost, prophesied of *these*, saying, behold the Lord cometh with myriads of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them—Enoch prophesied of *these*. Those then to whom the prophecy of the Lord's coming to judgment applied, were already manifest. As we have said the patience of God might be long, and has been not slack concerning his promise, but long-suffering to usward, but the Apostacy was complete in the eye of God; it had not kept its first estate.

There is another feature remarkable in this, that it was the *coming in* of these, not the going out, which marked the judicial object of wrath and excision. They were spots in their feasts of charity, feasting with the Christians. They exalted themselves especially, ἀποδιορίζοντες, distinguished themselves, as the Pharisees among the Jews, but did not leave the body; *they* were its danger and certain ruin *by being in it*.

The judgment of excision then was only in prophecy, but the condition to be judged was actually in existence, so that the Apostle could say *Enoch prophesied of these*. Their number might be different, the Church might have more completely forgotten how the great body of Israel were cut off in the wilderness, but the evil was there, and the judgment already pronounced. The Apostles had even told before "that there should be mockers in the last time."

The scriptures we have already cited shew, first, the warning of the possibility of failure and excision: secondly, the prophetic declaration that there would be an Apostacy: and thirdly, that those positively designated as the objects of judgment, as such Apostacy, from the earliest ages, were, if not matured in their effects, already there; so that the ever watchful Spirit of God could descry, designate and describe them; and evince that the mystery was already at work, the evil to be judged already there in existence.

That which remains of God's word is the warning or the

immediate threatening of excision; and account of a far different scene. Not the Father's intercourse with his children, to instruct, warn and comfort, but the revelation of subsequent evil, and arranging government of the world in the hands of the Lamb in the throne; when the Church was gone from the scene below, and could no longer be the subject of his judgment or his care.

If the testimony of the texts we have cited be such, there cannot be a more solemn consideration for God's children. The failure from the outset, through man's folly and evil, of the economy of the Church in the world. Further, the whole organization of succession and its co-ordinate ordinances of Church maintenance take their true place. Instruments of blessing in power have become the lever of Apostacy against the children of God. The doctrine of succession, and all its accompaniments, becomes the stamp and mark of recognized and sanctioned, because perpetuated Apostacy; for if the Church has failed as these texts declare, the provision for its perpetuation becomes the provision for the perpetuation of the failure, and the maintenance of the object of the Lord's sure judgment.

I press the testimony of the Epistle of Jude to this point. My object here is not to shew the degree of maturity to which the Apostacy may be generally or locally arrived, but the fact of its existence from the commencement in the judgment and by the revelation of God, applicable to the entire course and condition of the dispensation as a whole; and instructing us in the true character of pretension to succession and continuance.

May the Lord give eyes and ears to his children, that they may see what concerns his Church as he sees it.

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