

# The Great Apostasy Never Happened

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## | Introduction

One of the most fundamental claims of the Restoration is that a great and universal apostasy occurred following the death of the original apostles, necessitating a restoration of Christ's church, priesthood authority, and fullness of the gospel. Critics challenge this claim by asserting that the church Christ established has persisted in an unbroken line from the apostles to the present day, primarily through the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. This document examines the biblical, historical, and doctrinal evidence for a widespread apostasy and responds to the strongest objections against it.

## | The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The critic's case rests on several powerful pillars:

1. **Christ's own promise:** In Matthew 16:18, Jesus declared, "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." If a total apostasy occurred, then hell *did* prevail, and Christ's promise failed. This is perhaps the single strongest objection.
2. **Apostolic succession:** Church Fathers such as Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.3.1-3) and Tertullian (*Prescription Against Heretics* 32) trace unbroken lines of bishops from the apostles through their own day. These are not vague claims but named, sequential lists of bishops in specific cities.
3. **Institutional continuity:** The Catholic and Orthodox churches have maintained continuous institutional existence, liturgical practice, and creedal belief for nearly two millennia. The sheer weight of this historical continuity demands explanation.
4. **Christ's other promises:** Jesus said he would be with his disciples "always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20) and that the Holy Ghost would "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). These seem to preclude a total loss of truth.
5. **The "gates of hell" metaphor:** In ancient Near Eastern context, "gates" are defensive structures. Christ's church is the aggressor; hell is on defense. The church is promised ultimate victory, not defeat through apostasy.

This is a genuinely strong case that deserves careful, honest engagement rather than dismissal.

# | Biblical Response

## The Bible Explicitly Prophecies Apostasy

The New Testament authors themselves — including Christ — repeatedly and explicitly warned of a coming apostasy. These are not vague warnings but specific prophecies of widespread departure from the faith:

### Christ's own warnings:

- Matthew 24:4-5, 11-12 — "Many shall come in my name... and shall deceive many. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold."
- Matthew 24:24 — "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect."
- Luke 18:8 — "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" This rhetorical question implies the answer is no, or at best, very little.

### Paul's explicit prophecies:

- Acts 20:29-30 — Speaking to the Ephesian elders: "After my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."
- 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 — Paul directly states the Second Coming will *not* happen "except there come a falling away first" (Greek: *apostasia*). This is the very word from which "apostasy" derives. Paul treats this as a necessary precondition for Christ's return.
- 1 Timothy 4:1-3 — "The Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils."
- 2 Timothy 4:3-4 — "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine... and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."
- 2 Timothy 1:15 — "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me." Paul reports apostasy already occurring in his own lifetime, across an entire region.

### Other apostolic warnings:

- 2 Peter 2:1-2 — "There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies... and many shall follow their pernicious ways."
- 1 John 2:18-19 — "Even now are there many antichrists... They went out from us, but they were not of us."
- Jude 1:3-4 — Jude urges the saints to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares."
- Revelation 2-3 — Christ himself, speaking to the seven churches, identifies serious doctrinal and moral corruption already present in the first-century church. Five of seven churches receive stern rebuke.

**The critical point:** If the Bible itself prophesies apostasy, then the apostasy does not represent a failure of God's promises — it represents their *fulfillment*. The critic must explain why these extensive warnings were unnecessary if apostasy could never actually occur.

## Reinterpreting Matthew 16:18

The promise that "the gates of hell shall not prevail" against Christ's church need not mean the church would never experience apostasy. Several interpretive frameworks are consistent with both the promise and the apostasy:

1. **"Gates of hell" as death:** In ancient usage, the "gates of Hades" (Greek: *pylai hadou*) referred to the realm of the dead. Christ may be promising that death itself would not prevail — a reference to the Resurrection and its ultimate triumph, not to institutional continuity.
2. **Ultimate, not continuous, victory:** The promise may refer to the church's *final* triumph, not an unbroken institutional existence. Just as Israel was God's covenant people despite periods of near-total apostasy (the time of the Judges, the Babylonian exile), Christ's church can be promised ultimate victory while experiencing temporary periods of loss.
3. **The church as the covenant, not the institution:** If "church" (*ekklesia*) refers to God's covenant people broadly rather than a specific institutional structure, then the promise is kept whenever God has faithful followers on earth — even during periods when institutional authority was lost.
4. **Restoration as fulfillment:** The Restoration itself can be understood as the mechanism by which the gates of hell ultimately did *not* prevail. God restored what was lost, ensuring the church's final triumph.

## The Pattern of Apostasy and Restoration in Scripture

The Great Apostasy is not an anomaly in God's dealings with humanity — it follows a well-established biblical pattern:

- **The pre-Flood world:** Near-total apostasy (Genesis 6:5-7), followed by restoration through Noah.
- **Post-Babel:** Loss of truth, followed by restoration through Abraham.
- **Israel in Egypt:** Loss of covenant knowledge over 400 years, followed by restoration through Moses.
- **The period of the Judges:** Repeated cycles of apostasy and restoration (Judges 2:10-19).
- **The divided kingdom:** Widespread idolatry in both Israel and Judah, despite God's covenant promises.
- **The Babylonian exile:** Destruction of the temple, loss of the ark, cessation of many ordinances. The very institution God established was dismantled.
- **The intertestamental period:** Roughly 400 years with no prophetic voice (acknowledged by Jews and Christians alike as a period of prophetic silence).

If God's covenant with Israel did not prevent repeated apostasies, destructions, and exiles, there is no reason to assume His covenant with the Christian church would function differently.

## | Early Christian Evidence

### Evidence of Rapid Doctrinal Change

The historical record shows dramatic and rapid changes in Christian doctrine and practice within the first few centuries:

**Loss of spiritual gifts:** By the mid-second century, writers like Justin Martyr acknowledged that miraculous gifts were becoming rare. By the time of Chrysostom (late 4th century), he wrote that the spiritual gifts described by Paul had ceased entirely: "This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place" (*Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 29.2).

**Adoption of Greek philosophy:** The earliest Christian writers engaged with and eventually absorbed significant elements of Greek philosophical thought:

- Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD) explicitly described Christianity as a philosophy and used Platonic categories to explain Christian theology.
- Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) argued that Greek philosophy was a "schoolmaster" to bring Greeks to Christ, similar to the Law of Moses for Jews.
- Origen (c. 185-254 AD) developed an elaborate theological system deeply influenced by Neoplatonism.
- The Nicene Creed (325 AD) employed the Greek philosophical term *homoousios* ("of one substance") — a word found nowhere in scripture — to define the nature of God.

**Changes in church governance:** The New Testament describes a church led by apostles and prophets (Ephesians 4:11-14), with the offices of bishop (*episkopos*) and elder (*presbyteros*) used interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7). By the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch was already advocating for a monarchical episcopate (single bishop over each city) — a structure not found in the New Testament. The development of the papacy, metropolitans, and patriarchs represents further institutional evolution.

**Loss of ordinances and teachings:** Several practices described in the New Testament disappear or change dramatically:

- Baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29) — practiced in the early church but later condemned.
- The laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost as a separate ordinance from baptism (Acts 8:14-17; 19:5-6).
- The concept of a pre-mortal existence, which Origen taught but was later condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople (553 AD).
- The corporeal nature of God, which several early Fathers affirmed but which was later replaced by an incorporeal, philosophically-derived view.

## What the Church Fathers Actually Show

Ironically, the Church Fathers whom critics cite as evidence of continuity actually provide significant evidence of *discontinuity*:

- **Irenaeus** (*Against Heresies*, c. 180 AD) wrote precisely because heresy was rampant. His work documents the extraordinary proliferation of false teachings within the first 150 years of Christianity.
- **Tertullian** himself eventually left the mainstream church to join the Montanists, dissatisfied with what he saw as the church's spiritual decline.
- **Cyprian of Carthage** (c. 250 AD) documented widespread moral corruption among clergy and laity alike.
- **Eusebius** (*Church History*, c. 325 AD) records that by the end of the apostolic age, the "sacred chorus of the apostles" had passed and "the conspiracy of godless error took its rise through the treachery of false teachers" (3.32.7-8).

The Fathers' own writings reveal a church in constant struggle against internal corruption and doctrinal deviation — precisely the condition one would expect during an ongoing apostasy.

## | LDS Doctrinal Position

The Latter-day Saint understanding of the Great Apostasy includes several key elements:

1. **Loss of priesthood authority:** The apostasy was not merely a corruption of doctrine but a loss of the priesthood authority necessary to perform saving ordinances and lead Christ's church. When the last apostle died, the keys of the priesthood were no longer on earth.
2. **Gradual process:** The apostasy did not happen overnight. It was a process that began during the apostles' lifetimes (as Paul and others documented) and continued over centuries. Many sincere, faithful Christians preserved important truths even as the fullness of the gospel was lost.
3. **Not total destruction of all truth:** The LDS position does not claim that all truth was lost. The Bible was preserved (though with some textual corruption). Many correct principles about Christ, morality, and devotion survived. The creeds of Christendom contain much that is true. What was lost was the *fullness* of the gospel — the complete priesthood authority, the complete ordinances, and the complete doctrinal framework.
4. **Fulfillment of prophecy:** The apostasy was foreseen and prophesied. It was not a failure of God's plan but part of it. Just as the scattering of Israel was prophesied (Deuteronomy 28), so was the gathering. Just as the apostasy was prophesied, so was the restoration (Acts 3:19-21 — "the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began").

5. **The Restoration as the answer:** The restoration through Joseph Smith was the prophesied response to the prophesied apostasy. Daniel 2:44-45 speaks of God setting up a kingdom "in the last days" that would "never be destroyed" — language suggesting previous kingdoms *were* disrupted. Revelation 14:6 describes an angel bringing "the everlasting gospel" to earth — an event unnecessary if the gospel had never been lost.

## | Key Scriptures

### Prophesying the Apostasy

Scripture	Key Text
2 Thessalonians 2:1-4	"A falling away [ <i>apostasia</i> ] first" before Christ's return
Acts 20:29-30	"Grievous wolves... of your own selves shall men arise"
1 Timothy 4:1-3	"Depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits"
2 Timothy 4:3-4	"Shall turn away their ears from the truth"
2 Timothy 1:15	"All they which are in Asia be turned away from me"
Matthew 24:4-5, 11-12, 24	Many false prophets, false Christs, love growing cold
Luke 18:8	"Shall he find faith on the earth?"
2 Peter 2:1-2	"False teachers... many shall follow"
Amos 8:11-12	"A famine... of hearing the words of the Lord"
Isaiah 24:5	"Changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant"
Isaiah 60:2	"Darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people"

### Prophesying the Restoration

Scripture	Key Text
Acts 3:19-21	"Times of restitution of all things"
Daniel 2:44-45	God shall "set up a kingdom" in the last days
Revelation 14:6	An angel bringing "the everlasting gospel"
Isaiah 29:13-14	A "marvellous work and a wonder"
Ephesians 1:10	"Gather together in one all things in Christ"
Malachi 4:5-6	Elijah to come before the "great and dreadful day"

## | Responses to Common Objections

### "Matthew 16:18 — The gates of hell shall not prevail"

**Response:** This scripture can be understood in multiple ways consistent with the apostasy. The "gates of hell" (Greek: *pylai hadou*) most naturally refers to death, not apostasy. Christ is promising that death will not defeat his work — fulfilled through the Resurrection and ultimately through the Restoration. Moreover, the Restoration itself is the mechanism by which the gates of hell did not ultimately prevail. The church *was* restored; therefore, the promise was kept. The critic's interpretation actually creates a problem: if this verse guarantees unbroken institutional continuity, then *which* institution? Catholics and Orthodox split in 1054 and each claims to be the true continuation. Protestants broke from Catholicism in the 1500s. The verse cannot simultaneously guarantee the continuity of mutually exclusive institutions.

### "Apostolic succession proves continuity"

**Response:** Apostolic succession, as claimed by Catholic and Orthodox traditions, proves institutional lineage but not doctrinal or spiritual continuity. A chain of ordinations means little if what is being passed down has changed. The Aaronic priesthood was passed down in unbroken succession through much of Israel's history, yet this did not prevent Israel from falling into apostasy repeatedly. Moreover, LDS theology holds that the authority to act in God's name requires more than institutional lineage — it requires divine authorization. When the apostles died without passing on all the keys they held, the authority was lost regardless of how many bishops were subsequently ordained.

### "Good Christians have always existed — there was no total apostasy"

**Response:** The LDS position does not require that all good Christians disappeared or that all truth was lost. It requires that *priesthood authority* and the *fullness of the gospel* were lost. Many faithful, sincere Christians preserved important truths throughout the centuries. God worked through reformers like Luther, Calvin, Tyndale, and others to prepare the way for the Restoration. The existence of faithful Christians does not disprove the loss of institutional authority any more than the existence of faithful Israelites during the Babylonian exile disproved the destruction of the temple and the loss of its ordinances.

### "The Reformation is evidence the church was self-correcting, not lost"

**Response:** The Reformation actually provides *evidence for* the apostasy, not against it. The Reformers themselves testified that the church had fallen into deep corruption. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others all concluded that the Catholic Church had departed so far from biblical Christianity that separation was necessary. But the Reformers also recognized their own limitations — they did not claim to have restored apostolic authority, prophetic gifts, or the fullness of primitive

Christianity. They sought to reform using scripture alone, because they recognized that the living prophetic authority of the apostolic church was no longer available to them. Roger Williams, founder of the first Baptist church in America, ultimately concluded that no existing church had authority from Christ and that new apostolic authority was needed — a conclusion remarkably consistent with the LDS position.

## "If there was an apostasy, how was the Bible preserved?"

**Response:** The preservation of the Bible is actually consistent with the apostasy. God preserved the scriptural record precisely *because* living prophetic authority would be temporarily lost. The Bible served as a witness and a preparation for the Restoration. However, the Bible itself acknowledges that not all of God's word was preserved in it (John 21:25; 1 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 4:16 — references to lost epistles). Moreover, the Bible alone, without prophetic authority to interpret it, has produced thousands of competing denominations — evidence that the text alone is insufficient without the authority and revelation that originally accompanied it.

## | Conclusion

The Great Apostasy is not an ad hoc invention to justify the Restoration. It is a biblical doctrine, prophesied by Christ, Paul, Peter, and John. It follows the established pattern of God's dealings with his covenant people throughout history. The historical evidence of the first several centuries confirms rapid and significant changes in Christian doctrine, ordinances, and governance. The very existence of the Reformation — and the continued fracturing of Christianity into tens of thousands of denominations — testifies that something was lost that human effort alone could not restore. The Restoration through Joseph Smith is the fulfillment of prophesied events, not a repudiation of Christ's promises but their ultimate vindication.

## | Resources

- FAIR: [The Great Apostasy](#)
- Church of Jesus Christ: [The Great Apostasy](#)
- Church of Jesus Christ: [The Restoration](#)
- FAIR: [Matthew 16:18 and the Apostasy](#)
- James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (1909)
- Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (1987)
- Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray* (2005)

## | Addresses

- [[\_obsidian\_research/arguments/The-Great-Apostasy-Never-Happened|Argument: The Great Apostasy Never Happened]]

## | Related Defenses

- [[\_obsidian\_research/defense-drafts/no-modern-prophets-full|Modern Prophets Defense (Full)]]
- [[\_obsidian\_research/defense-drafts/no-modern-prophets-cheatsheet|Modern Prophets Defense (Cheat Sheet)]]
- [[\_obsidian\_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-full|Not Real Christians Defense (Full)]]
- [[\_obsidian\_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-cheatsheet|Not Real Christians Defense (Cheat Sheet)]]
- [[\_obsidian\_research/defense-drafts/sola-scriptura-bible-sole-authority-full|Sola Scriptura Defense (Full)]]
- [[\_obsidian\_research/defense-drafts/sola-scriptura-bible-sole-authority-cheatsheet|Sola Scriptura Defense (Cheat Sheet)]]