

Lesson 10--THE ORIGIN, THE DEPARTURE, AND THE RETURN

Lesson Text

Objective: The student can draw and explain a diagram showing the beginning of the church, various departures from the original plan, and an eventual return to the apostles' teaching.

Introduction:

How and when did the church begin?

When John the Baptist came, his message was "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). Jesus delivered the same message (Mark 1:15). In Mark 9:1, Jesus even told his disciples that some of them would not taste death before they saw "the kingdom come with power." Most of His parables were about "the kingdom of heaven."

Thus, Jesus' disciples were expecting the long-awaited and often predicted kingdom to come, and soon. In John 16:13, Jesus told the apostles he would send them the Holy Spirit to "guide them into all truth." In Acts 1:5-8, Jesus commanded these apostles to wait in Jerusalem to receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them. The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost, empowering them to speak as God's representatives.

Putting these passages together, we learn important truths. The prophesied kingdom would come in the lifetimes of Jesus' disciples. This kingdom would come with power. This power would come when the Holy Spirit descended on them, revealing to them the truth they should proclaim. Since this power came on them on Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, it was on that day that the kingdom came and on that day they began to preach the gospel message that Jesus had come to bring salvation.

Thousands heard Peter's message on Pentecost that Jesus was Lord and Christ and asked what they should do. Peter told these believers to "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:36-38). Three thousand obeyed and were baptized that day. And these "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayer" (Acts 2:42).

The apostles, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were preaching a body of teaching in which people were continuing steadfastly. This set of doctrines had several names. Sometimes it was called "the truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), and sometimes "the gospel" (Romans 1:16). Jude said, "Contend earnestly for the faith, once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3). Thus he not only gave the body of teaching a name, "the faith," but said to contend for it, and said it had all been delivered. All of the apostles and others who had been given the gift of prophecy (revelation) preached the same message and people all over the world were obeying it.

When a question was once raised as to whether these were all teaching the same thing about an issue, receiving Gentiles into the faith. At a meeting in Jerusalem they demonstrated that the Holy Spirit had told them all to preach the same message on that point as on all others (Acts 15).



Did any ever teaching something else?

Yes, a few began to teach things that were not the same as the inspired apostles had taught. Paul, for example, warned the Galatians that anyone who taught anything different than what he had taught was to be accursed. He had, he said, received what he taught “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12), and they were to reject anything else as a distortion of gospel (v. 7). John also mentioned some who had left them, denying that Jesus was the Christ (1 John 2:18-22). Paul also corrected false teachers at Corinth and Thessalonica, while Peter and Jude gave correction to some they knew who were not following the true teaching.

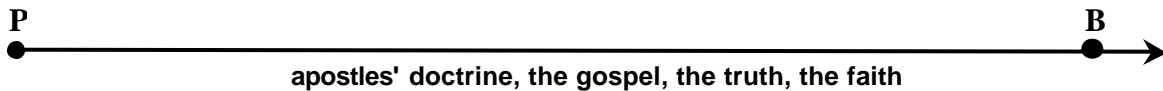
1. The Line.

Was there, then, a fixed standard by which to judge what is being taught?

Yes, there was a fixed body of teaching called “the truth,” “the gospel,” “the faith,” and the “apostles’ teaching.” This message had been divinely revealed and so was right. It was the standard by which all teaching should be judged and any who varied from it were called back to it or were marked as false teachers.

How might we represent this visually?

To represent this fixed standard by which we are to measure what anyone preaches or teaches, let us draw a straight line and place beneath it the Bible terms that may be applied to this body of apostolic teaching. This is “the line.”



The “P” represents Pentecost, because it was on that day that this new message began to be preached.

The first point of this lesson, then, is this: the early preaching and teaching of inspired apostles and prophets provided a standard for all to follow. Whether called “apostles’ teaching,” “the truth,” “the gospel,” or “the faith,” it was the body of teaching for all to follow. Even during this early time, any who did not follow this teaching were quickly corrected and, if they pursued their “distortions,” disciples were urged not to follow them.

What did the apostles anticipate for the future?

2. The Prediction.

The second point of this lesson is this: inspired prediction were given as warnings that there would be a large-scale departure from the truth. On several different occasions, Paul warned of a coming apostasy. He told the elders of the church in Ephesus, for example, “from among your own selves



men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). Particularly in his writings to Timothy, Paul mentioned a coming departure. 1 Timothy 4:1-2: "But the spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, . . . men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods." In 2 Timothy 3:1-9, Paul discusses those who would lead others astray, those who "oppose the truth" and who are "rejected as regards the faith." In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul continues this discussion saying that "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine . . . and will turn away their ears from the truth."

So first, there was a standard from which no one was to depart. And second, Paul predicts that there will be a substantial departure from "the truth," "the faith" by those who want to leave. He expects this warning to help keep people with the truth so they will not follow any departure.

Did the predicted apostasy come?

3. The Departure.

This is the third point of the lesson. Soon after the apostles died, there did begin to creep into the church some changes from the original order of things. In the second century some of the elders of the church began to take more authority. The revealed plan was to have a group of elders over each congregation of God's people. Then there began to be only one over a congregation and then one over a group of congregations. By 315 A.D., this hierarchy had developed to where there were five major "bishops" over all the church. These were located in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Rome. By 606 A.D., the bishop at Rome had declared himself the "universal bishop," or "pope" and, while not all agreed to follow him, he had enough power to rule most of the church. Obviously this was a departure from the plan of a group of elders over each congregation and no greater authority on earth than this.

The second century also saw the beginning of changes in the practice of baptism. Originally, only adults had been baptized, because one was first to believe and repent. Since babies could not do this, they were not baptized. Some began in the second century, however, to "baptize" babies.

In the third century, other departures developed. Men began to be designated as "priests" to put more ritual in their worship. The church in some places felt that the simple worship plan of the New Testament did not compete well with the rituals of the pagans. They wanted, therefore, to have more ceremony carried out by people with special dress and actions.

Also in the third century, there began to be a few cases of people being "baptized" by pouring rather than by immersion. The first recorded case was a man named Novatian in 253 A.D. He was thought too ill to be taken to a baptistry and so water was poured over him as he lay in bed. Such baptisms were called "clinical baptisms" and were not common. Baptism by anything other than immersion, however, was not common until about 1200 A.D.

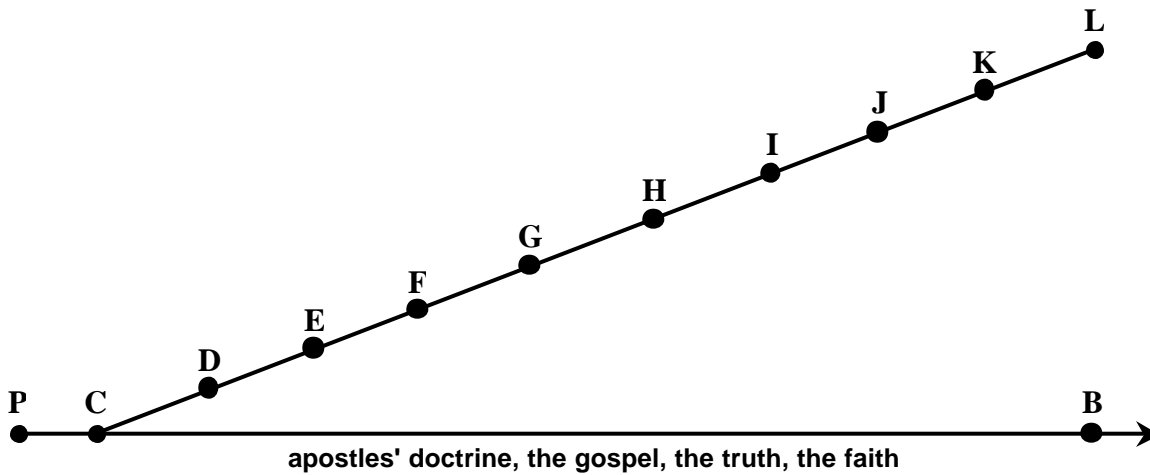
Other departures continued to come. About 500 A.D., images began to be placed in church buildings as historical memorials. Instruments of music in worship, which the church had strongly opposed during earlier times, began to be added about 1200 but were not common until after 1400. In 1074, some were forbidden to marry and in 1564 a decree was issued that the church



and not individuals must interpret scripture. In 1870, a decree was issued that when the Pope speaks officially, he is infallible. Since the bishop of Rome had declared himself the “universal bishop” in 606 and had been able to exert strong authority over others, the church in which these changes were taking place is now known as the Roman Catholic Church.

How might we represent the departures visually?

If we return to our original approach, we have a horizontal line representing “the apostles teaching,” “the truth,” “the gospel,” and “the faith.” We have now seen that there was a departure from this original plan on many points. Visually we may represent what we have studied so far like this.



These letters represent not just nine but a wide range of departures that developed after the first century, some significant ones of which have just been outlined. Of course, the Catholic Church did not change everything from the original plan, but on many significant points of teaching, worship, and morals, they did make changes.

Did anyone ever oppose any of these changes?

4. The Reformation.

Many opposed these changes, particularly as people began to emerge from the middle ages and to think more for themselves. One of the practices that had developed in the Roman church, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was the sale of indulgences. According to this doctrine, one could purchase temporal forgiveness for a sin, even before it was committed. The sale of these indulgences was widespread and brought huge sums into church coffers.

The sale of these indulgences so upset Martin Luther that in 1517, he posted ninety-five propositions opposing them on his church door in Wittenburg, Germany. As copies of these circulated, they created a sensation. Luther had wanted to correct certain practices in the church he believed were not scriptural. The response of the church, however, was not to change but



rather to drive him out of the church.

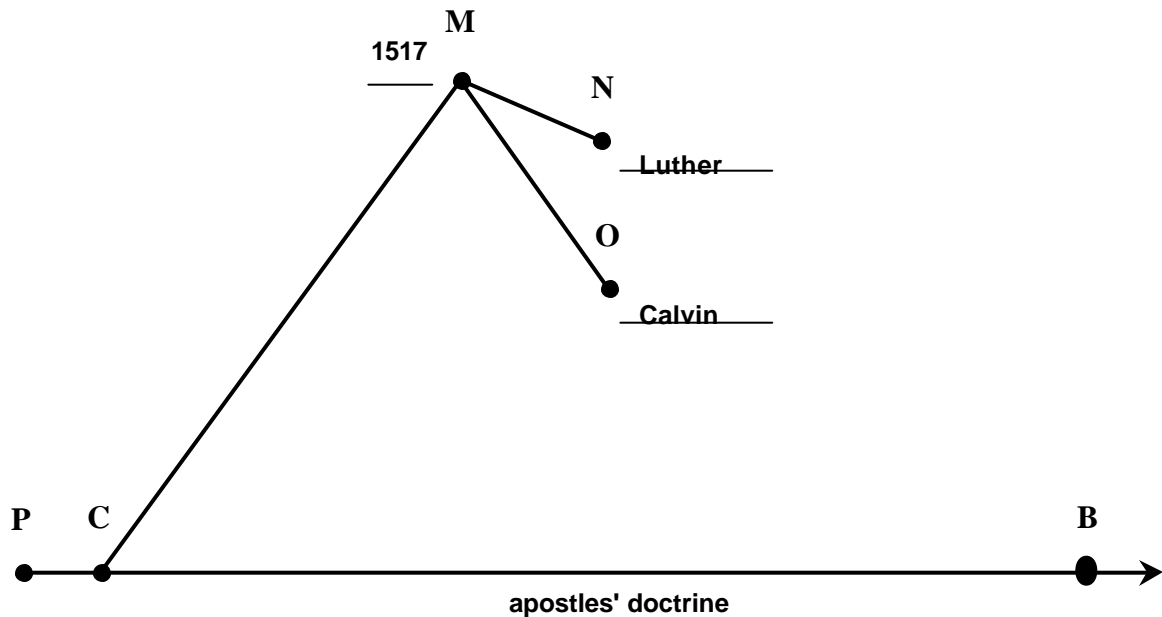
Others of that general time were also opposing certain doctrines of the Catholic church and were suggesting what they believed were teachings closer to scripture: Calvin, Zwingli, Savanarola, and others. Those who followed these “reformers” began examining more closely the teaching of the Bible. Since they were “protesting” about the Catholic church and seeking to reform it, their efforts became known as the Protestant Reformation. And that is our fourth point.

While some progress was made in identifying practices and teachings that were departures from the original plan presented in scripture, often these reformers did not agree among themselves on central issues. In addition, there often developed divisions and splinter groups among each of the branches of the Reformation Movement. In 1534, Henry VIII left the Roman Catholic Church to start the Church of England.

As a result of these various breaks with the Catholic Church and the work of various reformers, a number of new churches were begun--now called generally Protestant Denominations. Often, the original churches have now subdivided, each with several branches.

How may we represent these new details on our drawing?

Going back to the beginning point, we may illustrate the original plan, the departure, and the Reformation Movement like this.



Remember that this is only a conceptual drawing. It is not meant to represent historical detail with accuracy. The concepts so far are four: (1) there was an original body of teaching given by inspired men in the first century which God intended us to follow, (2) the apostles predicted a departure from this plan, (3) as predicted, there was a departure from this original plan in many



respects, and (4) beginning in the sixteenth century, there were efforts by some to move back toward the original plan and other developments which resulted in a new set of churches called Protestant Denominations.

Is it possible today to go all the way back to the line?

5. The Restoration.

The scriptures make it clear that God intended that His plan, revealed through the inspired apostles and prophets of the first century and written by them in permanent form, was to be followed without change. There are repeated warnings against false teachers and frequent calls to stay with "the truth," "the faith," "the gospel," and the "sound doctrine."

If this was God's intent, surely it is possible for people, even twenty centuries later, to follow His instructions. And indeed it has been done.

Over past centuries, many have made a return to scriptures their goal. Interestingly, often without knowing of the efforts of others, these have studied the scriptures and come to very similar beliefs and practices. Let us mention just a few of the cases since the late eighteenth century.

In Scotland, there were John Glas and Robert Sandeman and the Haldane brothers. In America, all of the following were involved in movements to restore the New Testament plan: Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, Barton Stone, James O'Kelly, Racoon John Smith, Elias Smith, Abner Jones, and many others. These came generally to the same conclusions about how to become a Christian, how to worship, how believers were to be organized, and how Christians were to live. They often came from different denominations such as Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist.

In addition, people in many different parts of the world, with just their Bibles as a guide, have also re-planted the "seed" of the Word and begun Christ's way in their time and place. Cases come from India, Germany, France, Ethiopia, Australia, Strasbourg, Nigeria, Spain, Italy, and more. One of the most interesting involved inmates inside the walls of the El Reno Federal Prison in Oklahoma. There, with only a Bible as their guide and no outside help, these prisoners started a congregation of their own. Only later did they learn that others on the outside were baptizing like they were, worshipping like they were, and believing as they were.

This should come as no surprise to us. Jesus said the word is a "seed." Anywhere one plants a seed, it will grow and produce exactly the same thing. The word of God is a seed, prepared by God for planting in the human heart. Wherever and whenever this pure seed is planted, without any human errors alongside it, true followers of Christ will result.

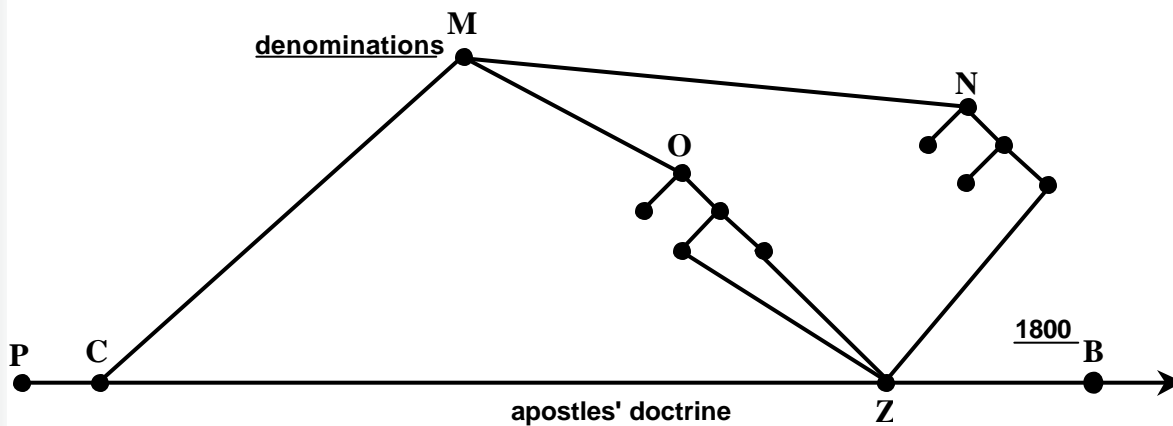
How may we illustrate this last step on our chart?

So far we have learned that (1) there was an original gospel message to be preached and preserved, (2) that the apostles resisted efforts to change it but predicted that eventually such departures would come, (3) that over a period of centuries such changes came in faith and practice, resulting in what is today known as the Roman Catholic Church, (4) that there were attempts to undo some of these changes in a Reformation Movement but the result was the establishment of many denominations which often differed among themselves, and (5) that about



1800 many people from a wide variety of churches and from many different countries, began seriously to restore the New Testament church. These steps can be represented in visual form as shown.

Again, this chart is not intended to be a historical representation, but a conceptual one. (1) There was a body of truth to which people responded to become and live as Christians in the first century. We have represented this as a line. God wanted us to stay on the line. Paul, John, Peter, Jude and others called people to stay there. (2) There were apostolic predictions, however, of departure and the predictions can true. (3) Step by step, new doctrines and practices were introduced that resulted in the Roman Catholic Church of today. While many of their teachings are still consistent with scripture, many others are the result of these departures. (4) There was a movement that began to correct some of the unscriptural practices of the Catholic Church which now is called the Reformation Movement. This movement did point out and correct some of these practices, but brought some errors of its own, and resulted in a multiplication of churches called denominations. (5) Over the centuries, but particularly around 1800, different people in many of these denominations decided to leave the churches of which they were part and to "return to original ground," to discover the teachings of Jesus and the plan for the church as it was in the first century when apostles and prophets were guided directly in their teaching and decisions. As these, usually independent from each other, searched the scriptures, they came to very similar conclusions. Their work led to the replanting of the seed of the word and it is being replanted daily throughout the world.



Conclusion:

That such a return to the New Testament is possible is evident from the many times and places where it has been done. We commend these who have led the way and urge others to follow in making Jesus our model and the New Testament church, which is His kingdom, to be our pattern.

