

The Early Days

As we have seen, the first believers were living in ‘the last days’ – as we are; further, we have seen that ‘the last days’ are marked by apostasy. So what was life like in the early *ekklēsia*? In this chapter, I will set out how the New Testament records the way in which this alarming picture of ‘the last days’ was played out in those early days, showing how the scriptural warnings about ‘the last days’ applied as much in the very early days as they do now – and, consequently what we are to expect in our time. The early *ekklēsia* lived surrounded by a sea of various cultures – all hostile – and it was under constant attack, both from without and from within.¹ Let me prove it.

As I have already noted, Acts records the sad and rapid way in which the *ekklēsia* was marred, even in the time of the apostles.² And the attacks were not confined to the believers in Jerusalem. I said I would return to this.

One can almost put it like this: which of the apostolic letters are not concerned with – dealing with, correcting – some kind of sinful disorder in behaviour, doctrine, whatever, in the *ekklēsia*? Paul was explicit about Scripture; he was far from seeing Scripture as a mere treasury of promises, designed to soothe believers in their difficulties. While I do not deny ‘the encouragement (comfort) of the Scriptures’ (Rom. 15:4), as Paul stated, Scripture also has a much sterner role to play:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

¹ See my ‘The Church Attacked: When, and Without or Within?’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Thirteen*.

² For sake of completeness, I will have to return to one or two passages already quoted.

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Note that: ‘for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work’ not ‘for making the believer feel good about himself, excusing every carnal desire he may have, that the man of God may be happy at all times’, confident that, no matter how carnal he is now, a glorious eternity awaits him.

Several letters were concerned with warnings and rebukes, or the machinations of false teachers who were infiltrating the *ekklēsia*. Take Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Hebrews, 2 Peter and Jude, as examples. Indeed, it would be quicker to tackle the matter the other way about, and list the books which had no such warnings and corrections!

Other letters, however, were more concerned with troubles arising from within. Paul, when bidding farewell to the Ephesian elders, was blunt about what was causing him alarm. Yes, there would be infiltration from outside; but that was not all:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:29-31).³

Yes, internal trouble would mar many assemblies.⁴

As a clear case of disorder, take the *ekklēsia* at Corinth. Paul rebuked the believers at Corinth for disunity, quarrelling over personalities (1 Cor. 1:11), carnality (1 Cor. 3:1-4), boasting (1 Cor. 4:6-8), poor or non-existent spiritual discipline (1 Cor. 5), a willingness to pursue their own interests in law against fellow-believers, and that before pagans (1 Cor. 6:1-8), sexual sin (1 Cor. 6:15-20), idolatry (1 Cor. 8), disorder in their

³ Paul’s fears were, alas, justified. Mark the difference between his letter the Ephesians and Rev. 2:1-7.

⁴ See my ‘The Church Attacked: When, and Without or Within?’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Thirteen*.

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assemblies, including carnality at the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 10-11,14), misuse of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12-14), lack of love (1 Cor. 13) and error over the resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

And that's just the apostle's first letter to that one *ekklēsia*! Elsewhere, I have explored Paul's way of countering false brothers in Antioch, Galatia and Corinth⁵ – yes, in addition to the grim list in the previous paragraph, the *ekklēsia* at Corinth was infested with false brothers, and the Corinthians were buying into their teaching! The *ekklēsia* at Corinth was far from faultless!

Take the *ekklēsia* in Galatia. The apostle was staggered at the rapidity of the defection in Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel (Gal. 1:6).

And he was explicit:

Because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in [had infiltrated our ranks, had sneaked in among us] to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you (Gal. 2:4-5).

Indeed, it was false teaching and the rapid spread of false gospels throughout the various *ekklēsia* – not just in Corinth and Galatia – that constituted one of Paul's greatest headaches, if not heartaches. One sick man in a room of healthy people does not catch 'wellness' from the healthy, but one sick man can infect an entire room of people. So it is with error: one bad apple in the barrel will ruin the lot, one blighted tuber will rapidly spread the infestation to the entire sack of potatoes. Just so with false teachers and their false gospels. Paul was constantly on the *qui vive*, stamping on the fires of error wherever they erupted, forever alert to the danger. Already – in Paul's day – false Christs and false gospels abounded, spread

⁵ See my *False*.

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by the preaching and writing of the false teachers. And believers were being seduced by such teachers and their false Christs and false gospels.

As the apostle told the Corinthians:

If someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough (2 Cor. 11:4).

As we have seen, he felt it necessary to tell the Galatians of his anguish:

I am astonished [he wrote] that you are so quickly deserting him who called you⁶ in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel (Gal. 1:6-11).

As he told Timothy:

Remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what

⁶ There has been much debate over 'him who called you'; I take this to be God the Father, by the Spirit, effectually calling sinners to Christ (John 3:3-8; 6:37,40,44; Rom. 8:26-30; 1 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:15-16; 5:5,6,8; 1 Thess. 2:12; 5:23-24).

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they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions (1 Tim. 1:3-7).

Paul warned the Thessalonians:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thess. 2:1-12).

Do not miss the reference to ‘the lawless one’ – The Antichrist. I have already drawn attention to the term in John’s first letter when he was dealing with the antichrists in his day (1 John 2:18-19; see also 1 John 4:3). And Paul said that The Antichrist will arise just before the second coming of Christ. Antichrists and their teaching were alive and active in the time of the first believers, are alive and active today, and will still be virulent and active right up until the appearance of Christ.

No wonder Paul warned Timothy:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:16).

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And:

Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some (2 Tim. 2:16-18).

And:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

As he explained, he had suffered from the defection of professed believers; and how it pained him! He pleaded with Timothy:

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica... Luke alone is with me... At my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me (2 Tim. 4:9-16).

Paul gave Titus his marching orders:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order... For an overseer, as God's steward... must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach... Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the

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commands of people who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work (Tit. 1:5-16).

And Peter left his readers in no doubt about what they should expect:

False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words (2 Pet. 2:1-3).

John warned his readers:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

Jude was awake to it:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in [secretly slipped in, wormed their way in] unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 3-4).

And as Christ rebuked the *ekklēsia* at Pergamum:

You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth (Rev. 2:14-16).

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And what about the Laodicean *ekklēsia*? What a boon for preachers – excellent source material for an emotional gospel address to sinners, with the ready-made literal illustration to hand care of William Holman Hunt.⁷ When all the time, the main thrust of Christ’s words are directed to the local assembly of believers in Laodicea, and, by extension, churches today. Seen in that light, Christ’s words are not so comfortable, are they? They read:

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realising that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev. 3:15-22).

And, don’t forget, there are five other churches in those two chapters! While not all of Christ’s words were critical, think how completely – and rapidly – the seven churches which Christ addressed all vanished. In particular, I say it again, how dramatic must have been the nose-dive at Ephesus (from Acts 20 and Ephesians to Revelation 2).

And as for Jewish and Gentile persecution of believers in the early days, let me give one example. Take the *ekklēsia* at Thessalonica:

You, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who

⁷ The sentimental representation of Christ as the light of the world.

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killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved – so as always to fill up the measure of their sins...

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour would be in vain (1 Thess. 2:14 – 3:5).

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering – since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thess. 1:3-8).

In addition to the point I am making here – that the days of the early *ekklēsia* were no bed of roses – notice the comfort Paul offered the believers at Thessalonica: the return of Christ. Nothing about a glorious time for the *ekklēsia* before Christ's return. Nothing about 'heaven when you die'. But all about the return of Christ.

Is all this not evidence enough to show that those who think that the early *ekklēsia* existed in some sort of insulating aura of perfection need to seriously re-think?

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This leaves us with the question, the decision. In light of the above, reader, what is your verdict? Would you say the course of the gospel during the early years of this age was one of Triumph or Tragedy? Of course, it wasn't either/or, black or white. Nevertheless which of the two would best fit the bill? Can Tragedy be ruled out altogether?