

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 7 February 2021. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Apostates and Church Government

2 Peter 2:10-12

Over the last few months, I have been preaching through **2 Peter 2**; and, as you may remember, I have given this chapter a name: “**The Acts of the Apostates.**” Here in **2 Peter 2**, Peter is revealing how *apostates* act and think. Peter gives us fair warning of how to recognise apostates. He reveals their false profession of faith; their empty spirituality; their cunning methodology; and their godless character.

Now, as we saw in the first verse of this chapter, apostate teachers often arise *within* Bible-preaching churches, and draw people away from the truth. They style themselves to be “teachers”; and they begin to whisper false doctrines. Then, when the time is right, they make their exit from the church, and draw many people with them. Worse yet, apostates sometimes *completely take over* what was once a legitimate, Bible-preaching church, and set themselves up as the teachers of a new, false “church.” The Apostle John explained that apostates “**went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us**” (1 John 2:19). In other words, they were never really saved; and the fact that they went out from us shows that they never were truly one of us. Tragically, even genuine Christians can be influenced by apostates, and can suffer great spiritual damage.

Apostates’ words are powerful. With their tongues, they destroy whole churches; and as God’s people, we must beware! In the next few messages, we will be looking at the kinds of things that apostates say in order to accomplish their goals. We will look at what they say about **church government**; what they say (and practice) in regard to **money**; and what they say about **Christian liberty**. We need to be aware of these tactics, because the wicked things that apostates said and practiced in the Apostle Peter’s day are the same kinds of things that apostates are saying and practicing today.

With this in mind, let’s turn to **2 Peter 2**. This message is entitled ***Apostates and Church Government***.

Read 2 Peter 2:9-12.

I. Apostates’ attitude: They despise church government (vv. 10-11).

At the end of **verse 9**, Peter made the statement that the Lord knows how to reserve the “**unjust**” for the Day of Judgment to be punished. Now, in **verse 10**, Peter is continuing this statement about the “**unjust.**” He says, “**but chiefly** (or, “most of all”) those who “**walk after the flesh,**” and “**despise government.**” Who are these unsaved people of whom Peter is speaking “**chiefly**”? He’s talking about the apostate teachers—the false prophets. Peter is saying that false prophets will receive a *much greater* punishment on the Day of Judgment than most other unsaved people will receive. Why? Because they purposely, actively went about to lead others away from the Lord! God has special indignation against those who use a position of influence to lead others astray. For example, Jesus said that it is better that a millstone were hanged around a person’s neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea, than that he should “**offend**” a little child, and cause him to stumble, and stray from God!

Now, let's examine the *attitude* of apostates. (**Read verse 10 again.**) Peter describes the attitude of false prophets as “**presumptuous.**” In other words, they are “daring.” Peter also describes them as “**self-willed.**” They follow their own will, instead of God's will. Also, there are two things that they particularly despise. First, they despise “**government.**” This word “**government**” comes from the word *kuriotetos*, which means “dominion,” or “authority.” Secondly, apostates speak evil of “**dignities.**” The word “**dignities**” comes from the word *doxas*, which literally means “the glories,” or “the honoured ones.” Whoever these “**dignities**” are, they are people in positions of authority, who should be honoured.

Now, what kind of “**government**” is Peter talking about, here? Is he talking about civil government, and civil leaders? At first glance, it might appear that way. After all, throughout the Bible, we are commanded to honour and respect civil leaders. God hates anarchy and lawlessness; and for that reason, He has ordained human government. There is no one sitting upon any throne, or in any civil office, whom God has not *permitted* to be placed there. It doesn't matter how evil that person may be: God has allowed that person to be in that office for His own sovereign purpose. Therefore, we, as God's people, are commanded to obey civil government; to pray for our kings and rulers; and to speak respectfully of our leaders' offices. Even though we may regretfully have to point out the evil things that our rulers are doing, we are to speak respectfully of them. The first Baptist preacher of this age, John the Baptist, pointed out that King Herod was committing adultery, and urged him to repent; and he lost his head for it! John could have kept his mouth shut, so that he wouldn't get in trouble; but he didn't. He spoke the truth, out of true concern for Herod's soul.

As believers, we are to obey civil leaders in all things—*unless and until they command us to disobey God's laws.* That is where we must draw the line. When the Apostles were commanded by the Sanhedrin not to preach in the name of Jesus, they boldly, yet respectfully said, “**We ought to obey God rather than men.**” Only when rulers command us to disobey God should we disobey them; and even then, we must still speak respectfully of them. Why? Because God has placed them in their office; and to rail against their office is to rail against God. It's that simple. **Romans 13:1** says, “**Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.**” In **1 Timothy 2:1-2** Paul says, “**I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.**”

Christians are to obey and speak respectfully of civil government. The kind of respect that you have toward civil authority is a good indicator of the kind of respect that you will have toward any other God-ordained authority (such as your parents, or your husband, or your teacher at school, or your boss at work). Yet, that having been said, the “government” that Peter is talking about in this verse is not *civil* government. He's talking about *church* government. He's talking about the leadership in the local church.

Now, to be sure, apostates often do have a defiant attitude toward civil government. However, it is *church* government that they especially wish to undermine. That's how I know that Peter is talking about church government. The whole subject of **2 Peter 2** is the danger that lurks in *churches*. Remember, false teachers often arise from *within* Bible-preaching churches; and in order to accomplish their goal of getting a following of people, the first thing that apostate

teachers will do is to discredit the leadership of the church in people's minds. Their railing words and disrespectful attitude toward the government of Christ's church should be like a "red flag" to genuine believers. Their railing words betray who they really are.

Now, before we go any further, let's see what God says about church government.

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-15.

I'd like to point out a couple truths in **verse 15**. First of all, Paul refers to the "**house of God**" as the "**church of the living God**," and as the "**pillar and ground of the truth**"! A local church, no matter how small it may be, is stupendously important. It is nothing less than the "**pillar and ground of the truth**"! No matter how "non-essential" the world may consider churches to be, God considers the local, Bible-preaching church to be the most important institution on earth! A church doesn't *decree* what is true and what is not. Only God can do that. However, it does *defend, protect, guard, and proclaim* the truth that God has revealed in His Word.

The second truth I wish I would like to point out from **verse 15** has to do with the *order and structure* of the church. In **1 Timothy 3**, Paul said that he had written to Timothy so that he might know how to "**behave**" in the "**house of God**." The word "**behave**" means "to conduct," or "to set in order." What Paul is telling Timothy is that the "**house of God**" (the local church) has a divinely ordained order of government. By the way, the Scripture is very clear about what the order of church government is.

First, there is **Christ Himself**, who is the true Head of the church. His Word is our authority, and His Spirit is our Guide. We worship *Him alone*. Then, under Christ, there is the **pastor** (who is also known as the bishop, or elder, or undershepherd). He is to feed and strengthen the congregation with the Word of God. He is to oversee the flock, and to protect it from false teaching. He is to warn members about sinful choices that they are making in their lives, and to exhort them to live for God. He is to rebuke egregious sin in the church, and to lead the church to enact church discipline, when necessary. He is also to administrate, and to provide leadership and direction. And what should the pastor receive in return? Respect, and submission. In **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**, Christians are admonished to "**know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.**" Depending upon the size of the church, there may be **several pastors** who teach and lead within sections of the congregation; and they all answer to their pastor, and support him, and offer counsel.

As we saw in **1 Timothy 2**, there are also **deacons**. Deacons do not rule; they serve the congregation, and distribute to those in need. Yet, they are in a position of respect and trust. There are also the decisions of **the church body**. After praying and seeking the Lord's will, the assembly votes on important matters—sometimes financial matters, sometimes policy matters, sometimes evangelism and missions matters, and sometimes membership matters. Church bodies elect pastors, and Sunday School teachers, and music leaders, and deacons, and committee members, and trustees (if needed); and these are crucial decisions. Jesus said that when an assembly (even an assembly of *two or three members*) binds together to make a decision, that decision is "**bound** (or "ratified") **in heaven**" (**Matthew 18:18**). A true church, no matter how small its size, has the stamp of heaven. God *identifies Himself* with His church.

So, what does all this mean? It means that despising and railing against a legitimate, Bible-preaching church, or against a pastor who has done nothing to disqualify himself from his office, is serious business, and is a sure way to invite God's judgment. Now, make no mistake about it: pastors are not dictators. They are not beyond doing wrong, or above rebuke. Should a pastor start to teach heresy, or to commit immorality, or to do some other deceitful, fraudulent, or unethical thing, charges should be raised against him in the same manner that they are raised against any other member--with two or three witnesses. If it be found that a pastor have disgraced the name of Christ, then he should be removed from office, and not allowed back into membership except upon the condition of genuine repentance. (Even then, he may not be a pastor again.) If he be committing a *civil* crime, he should be handed to civil authorities. However, if a pastor be following the Lord, and has done nothing to bring reproach upon Christ or His church, then he is to be obeyed, and treated with love and respect.

Read 1 Timothy 5:17-20.

Read Hebrews 13:17.

We can expect our secular, Bible-hating world to rail against Christ's churches, and against church leadership. However, we can also expect to hear such railing from teachers who *claim* to be Christians. Apostates are not afraid to speak evil of dignities. They rail against churches, and church leadership, all day long. You don't have to go far on the internet to find "Christian" web sites that blast the office of pastor, and blast the very idea of the local church. They paint all pastors either as greedy, lazy, self-serving, and untrustworthy, or as weak and cowardly (while they, of course, are spreading the *real* teachings of Jesus). They blast the authority of the local church, and allege that "real" Christianity isn't to be found in a "*man-made* institution" like the local church. Why, churches are evil, don't you know? They actually have *rules*, and talk about things like *tithing!* (Yet, ironically, many of these same people solicit funds to support *their* so-called "internet ministry," which has no accountability whatsoever!)

We are used to hearing such things, aren't we? Yet, we should not allow ourselves to "get used to it." We should recoil at the thought of blasting the government of Christ's church. We should find it astonishing that anyone would be foolhardy enough to rail against dignities! Peter points out in **verse 11** that even angels, who are immensely more powerful than we, do *not* hurl railing accusations against dignities. When they stand before the Lord, they may have to give report about sins and flaws that they see in churches, or in pastors, down on earth; but when they do, they do not *rail* against those churches or pastors, because *they recognise their God-ordained authority!* Let that sink in! Angels are *far* above us all, both in strength and in moral superiority; yet, they respect the government of Christ's church.

I really love, and highly esteem, the former pastor of my home church. I still call him "my pastor." He is a kind and godly man. Now, I never agreed 100% with every decision he made, or with every little thing he taught. There are things with which I still, to this day, disagree with him. (On the other hand, there are some areas where I *used* to disagree with him; but after growing more in the Lord, and studying the matter in God's Word, I found out that my Pastor was right!) However, regardless of whether I always agreed with him, I always loved, prayed for, and supported my pastor, and never spoke against him. I didn't speak

against my church, either. I didn't always vote "yes" in every business meeting. Sometimes I disagreed with the outcome. However, I never went around bad-mouthing the church's decision. I knew that I should respect church government. But such is not the case with apostates. Apostates rail against church government, and against God's leaders. In a few moments, we will look at an example of an Old Testament apostate named Korah. First, though, let's see what Jude had to say about this particular apostate.

Read Jude 8-11. (To "gainsay" means to "speak against.")

Read Numbers 16:1-35.

Make no mistake about it: Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On, were not believers who had gotten off track, and made a big mistake. They were *unbelievers*. They were lost and blind men. How do I know? Because the Bible says that they went down into "the pit" (*sheol*, or hell)! However, not only were they lost men; they were *apostates*. They had departed from truth, and they were trying to get the whole congregation to follow them. Their apostasy manifested itself in their rebellion against their spiritual leaders, Moses and Aaron. Notice how cleverly they did it, too. In classic apostate fashion, they mixed truth with lies! **(Read verse 3 again.)**

Do you see how they approached this? They reasoned that *all* the congregation of Israel was holy, and that the LORD was among them. Now, so far, this is true. The whole congregation was "holy." As a nation, they *were* set apart from all the nations of earth. God *was* among them. He *did* dwell in the midst of their camp. However, the *conclusion* to which they came was utterly false, and rebellious. Basically, they were telling Moses and Aaron, "You don't have any right to be in your positions of authority over us, because you're no different from the rest of us. We're *all* holy." *That* was where he departed from truth. Moses and Aaron *did* have the right to be in their positions of authority, because *God* had placed them there.

Now, Korah didn't get far in his apostasy. God put a swift stop to it. However, God doesn't always destroy apostasy "in the bud." Usually, apostasy comes to full bloom; and God's people must have the discernment to resist it. Let's take a look at a New Testament example.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-3.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-2.

Do you see what Paul was dealing with? There were people who were going around challenging Paul's apostleship. They had the audacity to claim that Paul wasn't a real apostle! Now, Paul had proven, years earlier, that God had called him to be an Apostle. Paul was not one of the *original* 12 Apostles, of course. To be one of the original 12, you had to have been baptised by John the Baptist, and to have been with Christ from the beginning of His ministry. However, Paul *had* seen Christ after His resurrection, when He appeared to him on the road to Damascus. This qualified him to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. Furthermore, the original 12 Apostles had all heard Paul's testimony; and God had confirmed to them that Paul was, truly, an Apostle. Paul also had been given the "signs of an Apostle." He had the ability to do voluminous miracles, and to speak in multiple tongues. Yet, despite all this, there were people going around saying that Paul was not an Apostle; and some of the members of the church of Corinth were beginning to listen to this accusation. Thus, Paul was forced to defend himself.

Now, this denial of Paul's Apostleship was, in and of itself, apostasy. To deny Paul's apostleship was to speak against God, who had chosen Paul as an Apostle. However, Paul knew that there was something far more sinister afoot than the questioning of his apostleship.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-4.

Paul knew instinctively that it wouldn't be long before these people who had spoken against his authority would begin to preach *another gospel*, and *another Jesus*. He also feared that because some of the believers in Corinth had already listened to these false teachers, they might actually listen to a false gospel! We're talking about complete, utter apostasy here, folks! These rebels who lurked in the churches weren't out merely to question Paul's apostleship; they were out to introduce an entirely different gospel—a false, damnable gospel!

Please notice that these people didn't attack the Gospel *at first*. They merely started out by "despising government." They started out by "speaking evil of dignities." They began slowly, by raising questions about Paul's apostleship. ("After all," they probably said, "we need to be *sure* that Paul is really an Apostle.") But then, when these apostates had drawn people's hearts away from *biblical authority*, and had gotten them to despise the very man who had led them to Christ, they began to introduce a false, works-based "gospel"; and even true Christians began to tolerate this apostasy! Paul's worst fears were confirmed. It wasn't long before churches were abandoning the true Gospel! Here is the fruit that it produced.

Read Galatians 1:6-9 / 3:1-3 / 4:13-16.

I have been saved for 30 years; and in that time, I've often seen genuine Christians depart from biblical truth inch by inch, as they give ear to the whisperings of wolves in sheep's clothing. Now, many times, church splits get started because of genuine believers who start thinking in a worldly way. In time, they get upset about things, and leave; and inevitably, people follow them. (Thank God, I've seen some of these believers come back years later, acknowledge their wrong, and get it right.) However, there are many times when the people speaking against the church and the pastor are *not* genuine Christians, but rather *apostate teachers* who have crept into the church, with an agenda of either taking over the church, or of drawing away a large faction of it. I've seen it, folks; and I can testify that it's ugly!

Yet, here's what you need to understand. Rarely do wolves in sheep's clothing begin by attacking foundational doctrines of the Bible. They know better than to start out that overtly. They begin by attacking the *government* of the church, and the *pastor*. They have him for Sunday afternoon lunch, so to speak. They question the sincerity of the pastor and other leaders in the church, and make them seem unloving because of their insistence on separation from the world, and complete commitment to God. "Why," they say, "pastor just doesn't understand. After all, what does the pastor do all week? He probably just sits around all day. I think he's just in it for the money. And do you know what? Pastor didn't even shake my hand last week. I think he has a grudge against me. I think Deacon Smith doesn't like me, either. I think this church is too judgmental. What's the pastor's big problem with Christian rock music, and with other Bible versions, anyway? We need to fit in with the times. And why are we using so much money for this project?" And on and on the accusations go.

Sadly, too many genuine believers *listen* to the apostates who rise up in their midst. Instead of seeking to know the Scriptural reason for the church's practices, they ignore God's Word, and listen to fleshly, worldly reasoning. They begin to think, "Yeah! That's right! This church is judgmental! This church *isn't* very loving! I'm going to go somewhere else!" At this point, the one behind the insurrection stands up, and offers to be their leader. They go off and start their own group; and before long, they are teaching false doctrines that undermine the authority of God's Word, and the Gospel itself. Can genuine Christians get caught up in something like this? Absolutely! It happens all the time. It happened in the churches of Galatia; it happened in Corinth; and it still happens today. However, there are consequences for Christians' lack of discernment. Christians who give ear to apostasy end up suffering much spiritual damage in their lives (including losing their own children to the world) before they finally see their error, repent of it, and retrace their steps back to biblical truth, and to a biblical church. Beware apostasy, brethren! Apostasy hurts!

II. Apostates' aptitude: They are without spiritual understanding (v. 12).

(Read verse 12 again.) In this verse, Peter describes the apostate's *aptitude*. (By the way, if you don't know what "aptitude" means, it means "ability to understand.") An apostate's aptitude, when it comes to spiritual things, is zero. When Peter calls apostates "**natural brute beasts,**" he isn't trying to hurl a mean-sounding name at them. He's making a point about their understanding of spiritual things. The point is simple: apostates *have* no understanding! An animal can't live by faith in God: it operates only according to his natural senses. Likewise, apostates, who do not know God, live only by sight, and not by faith. The Bible says in **1 John 2:20** that Christians have an "**unction (or anointing) from the Holy One,**" and they "**know all things.**" In other words, true Christians have the ability to understand all things that God has revealed in His Word, as long as they submit their mind to the Holy Spirit.

Apostates, on the other hand, do not have this understanding. That is why they despise church government. They are devoid of the Spirit of God. They operate only by their twisted, sin-warped, human reason. Genuine Christians humbly look to God's Word for answers if they do not understand a doctrine or practice that their church government upholds. In contrast, apostates do *not* look to God's Word. They scoff and ridicule, and get others to join them in rebellion. They speak evil of things that they don't understand. They *cannot understand* the need for Christ's church to separate herself from the world, because *they* are of the world. They cannot understand the need for a church to work, and give, and pray, and do exploits beyond their power to propagate the Gospel, because *they* have never believed the Gospel, nor experienced its power. They simply do not understand these things. **Proverbs 28:5** says, "**Evil men understand not judgment: but they that seek the LORD understand all things.**"

Apostates lack understanding because they lack the illumination of the Spirit of God. They cannot exercise faith, because they walk only in the flesh. **(Read verse 10.)** The reason that apostates despise government and dignities is that they "**walk after the flesh,**" and in the "**lust of uncleanness.**" Apostates are controlled by fleshly, sensual impulses. In contrast, God's people walk after the Spirit. **Romans 8:1** says, "**There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.**"

Conclusion: Beware, brethren! Apostates arise from within churches. Redemption Baptist Church must be vigilant in upholding the truth, and in reproofing error, so that when false teachers come along, we will

be ready to resist them. Christian, are you immersing yourself in the Word of God, so that you will not be affected by apostasy? I would also ask, **“Are you saved?”** Merely attending a church doesn’t make you a child of God. Merely reading the Bible doesn’t make you saved. Coming from a Christian family can’t redeem your soul. You must personally repent of your sin, and trust in Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary.

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out”!