



Mystery of Lawlessness

The forces of darkness, by definition, work in darkness. Unable to stand up to the exposure of light, they must cloak themselves in secrecy and carry out their activities in conspiratorial fashion. This is *the apostasy* prophesied by Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians and his first letter to Timothy. Acting in accordance with, and at the urging of, the prince of darkness, they surreptitiously seek to secure positions of influence inside Christ's church, and divert its energies for personal gain and prominence. "Certain persons have crept in unnoticed," was Jude's analysis and exposé (Jude 1:4). Similar warnings of the others — Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John — should not be lightly dismissed, but rather should encourage each saint to "make certain about His calling and choosing

you" (2 Peter 1:10). Each disciple of Christ must become a student of the Word, and increasingly able to discern between truth and falsehood.

▼ **Early developments** — The scripture predicted *the apostasy*; it did not record the history of its development because the scripture was completed before the apostasy completely formed. It is well documented that, even before the apostles were all dead, changes began to occur in the way the local congregations were governed. Each local congregation, biblically, is an independent entity, governed by elders in conjunction with evangelists (when the congregation is completely formed). When Paul spoke to the elders of Ephesus, for example, he exhorted them, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Herein the three descriptive titles given to these men are brought forth: They are *elders* — older men; they are *bishops* — overseers; and they are *pastors* — shepherds. These elders were subject directly to the Holy Spirit (or Jesus, as the Head of the church), not to any intermediary authority. But, as Paul informed the brethren in Thessalonica, "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work" (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Fleshly-minded men were already pushing themselves into positions of prominence, setting the stage for a power struggle within these congregations rather than focusing on seeking and saving the lost. Hence Paul and Peter were barely in their graves when some men began elevating themselves as *bishops* over the *elders*; this lawlessness triggered the development of further perversions of the Lord's organizational structure for the local church.

▼ **Escalating authority** — As these "bishops" consolidated power, they also eliminated the office of evangelist. Evangelists, by the Lord's design, served as a check on the bishops. When the bishops sinned (the desire for power being one of those sins), evangelists (or preachers) were to "rebuke [them] in the presence of all, so that the rest may

be fearful of sinning" (1 Timothy 5:20). With evangelists out of the way, the path was now cleared for the escalation of authority. Bishops then began to be over several sets of elders in a district which came to be called a *diocese*. Then there needed to be an *archbishop* over the bishops, then a *patriarch* over the archbishops. Finally, in the western area of what had been the Roman Empire, the *universal bishop* (or *Pope*) claimed to govern every congregation.

This development to the papacy took nearly 600 years, the Pope being "the man of lawlessness ... [who] takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as God." Paul further explains: "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed. For the *mystery of lawlessness* is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed" (2 Thessalonians 2:5-8a). Following a series of increasing attacks by Germanic tribes from the north, Rome officially fell in AD 476. With the emperor ("he who now restrains") gone, the papacy could openly develop, and thus the "man of lawlessness" be revealed.

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