Early Christianity Revisited, Not Revised

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Introduction

My aim is not to reinvent Christianity or offer a fresher, more marketable version of it. Quite the opposite. This project is an act of remembrance. It stands on ground laid by the apostles, cemented by the blood of the martyrs, and preserved—however imperfectly—by those who came after.[1] In more recent generations, scholars like Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham, N. T. Wright, and James D. G. Dunn have helped us recover the world of earliest Christianity—not as a distant relic, but as a living faith practiced by real communities with faces, failures, and unshakable allegiance to Jesus as Lord.[2]

But modern Christianity is noisy. Every generation inherits a church shaped not only by Scripture, but by culture, politics, psychology, and survival strategies. The result is a faith that often answers questions the apostles never asked, while ignoring the ones that consumed them—faithfulness, holiness, unity, suffering, endurance, and love that looks like crucifixion. The further we drift from the apostolic witness, the more we are tempted to mistake familiarity for faithfulness.

This is why I write—because the task of the Church is not innovation, but recovery.[3] We do not need a new Christianity. We need to return to the old one, the apostolic one, the one that did not separate belief from obedience or grace from transformation. The early Church did not survive on cleverness, branding, or emotional experience. It survived on truth—confessed, practiced, and, if needed, died for.

Drift rarely begins in defiance. It often starts with good intentions—reforming dead tradition, protecting grace, restoring spiritual power. But when correction loses proportion, truth bends into imbalance. Over time, noble attempts to revive the Church can unintentionally

reshape it into something the apostles would not recognize. The danger is not sudden rebellion but gradual redefinition. Fourth-century heresies did not announce themselves as such; neither do modern ones.

This work, then, is not nostalgia. The goal is not to romanticize a "pure" past or pretend the early Church was free of conflict and confusion. It wasn't—just read 1 Corinthians or the letters of Ignatius.[4] Rather, this project is an act of allegiance. A conviction that we cannot solve modern confusion by drifting further from our origins. The way forward is the way back—to the Scriptures as the apostles read them, to the faith as Clement, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Athanasius lived and taught it, to a Christianity that was costly, communal, and full of hope.

If the Church today feels fragmented, exhausted, or spiritually thin, it is not because the gospel has lost power. It is because we keep trading it for lesser things. Modern doubts require ancient roots. The Church's future faithfulness depends on remembering her first love.

The Drift: Small Steps with Eternal Consequences

No movement in church history begins by announcing its intention to abandon the gospel. Revolutions rarely start as rebellions—they begin as reform. A preacher wants to revive holiness. A community wants to escape dead ritual. A generation longs for something more authentic, more powerful, more comforting. Those instincts are not wrong. In fact, they often emerge because the Church has lost something vital.

The danger is not the desire for renewal—it is what happens when we pursue renewal without proportion.

From the first century onward, the pattern has repeated: the church drifts not through violent rejection of truth, but through slow imbalance. Paul warned the Galatians that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). Small deviations—when repeated, systematized, and inherited—become entire theologies. Heresy is rarely born in outright lies; it is usually truth pulled too far in one direction.[5]

Most of the movements we will explore did not begin in hostility toward Scripture. The Quakers sought living faith over cold formality. Wesley longed for holiness that affected real life, not just creeds. Early Pentecostals wanted a Christianity that felt like the Book of Acts, not a lecture about it. Each began with a legitimate ache. But over time, the answer to a real problem hardened into a distorted system. The drift came not from malice, but momentum.

Doctrinal drift rarely looks dangerous in its early stages. It often looks like passion, authenticity, even spiritual breakthrough. Yet the enemy is subtle. His tactic, from Eden onward, is not to remove God's voice, but to slightly alter it—just enough that it no longer demands obedience.[6] The serpent did not deny God's words to Eve; he reframed them. That is how drift works—by turning emphasis into excess, and freedom into entitlement.

This section is not an obituary for church history but a map. It shows how we arrived here—why modern Christianity holds tensions the apostles never intended, and why churches now debate questions that early believers never asked. The point is not to shame tradition, but to measure it. All of us inherit a Christianity shaped by generations before us. The question is whether those layers have clarified or obscured the foundation.

What follows, then, is a guided walk through several centuries of well-meaning drift—not to condemn, but to understand. Only by tracing how far we have shifted can we know what it means to return.

The Quaker Experiment

The Religious Society of Friends—later nicknamed "Quakers"—did not emerge in a vacuum. Mid-17th century England was spiritually exhausted. The Church of England felt rigid and politicized; Puritanism, though passionate, was increasingly known for dogma and denunciation rather than joy or transformation. Into that world stepped George Fox—a shoemaker's son who wandered the countryside convinced there must be more to Christianity than sermons and sacraments that left the soul unchanged.[7]

Fox sought a faith that felt alive. He wrote of longing for a religion "immediate and living, not notions but the power of life itself."[8] In time, this became the central Quaker conviction: that Christ's light speaks directly within every individual. They called it the "Inner Light" or "that of God within." And at first, it was a necessary protest—against hypocrisy, against empty ritual, against churches that quoted Scripture loudly but obeyed it little.
But this is where drift quietly began.

By shifting authority from the apostolic witness to personal inward experience, Fox unintentionally planted a theological seed with enormous consequences. What began as a call to sincerity became, in some communities, a subtle dismissal of biblical structure, sacraments, and even creedal truths. The Lord's Supper, baptism, and ordained leadership were abandoned as unnecessary "outward forms." Scripture was affirmed—but practically overshadowed—by the belief that the Spirit speaks directly to the individual believer in the moment.[9]

Historian Rufus Jones admitted that by the 18th century, many Friends "substituted the Light within for the Word without."[10] And while the Quakers produced remarkable social reformers—champions of abolition, prison reform, and peace—they also drifted into a kind of spiritual individualism that separated conscience from the corrective voice of Scripture and the wider Church.

The early Christians never confused the Spirit's inner witness with private autonomy. Ignatius of Antioch, writing barely a generation after the apostles, warned believers not to act "according to their own judgment" but to remain united in doctrine, worship, and obedience.[11] Authority was never meant to reside in isolated conscience, but in the Spirit working through Scripture, community, and sacrament.

Quakerism began with a cry for authenticity—and that cry should still convict the Church today. But without anchoring experience to the apostolic pattern, sincerity eventually drifted into subjectivity. What began as protest became permission: the freedom to believe, or not believe, whatever one inwardly felt. And sincerity, divorced from truth, is not sanctification—it is sentiment.

Wesley and the Holiness Movement

A century after Fox, another reformer felt the pulse of a stagnant church. John Wesley never set out to found a denomination. He remained an Anglican priest his entire life. His concern was not structure, but spiritual anemia. England's churches were full, but hearts were unchanged. Sermons spoke of grace, yet society remained marked by vice, poverty, and religious indifference.[12]

Wesley preached what he called “holiness of heart and life”—faith that did more than save from hell; it reshaped character, desires, habits. In A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, he wrote that Christianity must produce “a heart habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor.”[13] To Wesley, perfection did not mean sinlessness, but maturity—freedom from willful rebellion, not from human weakness. But after Wesley’s death, the movement he sparked began to tilt.

Some of his followers—especially in 19th-century America—were no longer content with gradual transformation. They wanted certainty, immediacy, crisis. Figures like Phoebe Palmer and Asa Mahan preached that entire sanctification could be received instantly—just as one receives conversion—if one simply “laid all on the altar” and believed.[14] This redefined sanctification from a lifelong journey into a singular spiritual moment. It was not what Wesley taught—but it sounded like what people wanted.

The result was a subtle theological shift: holiness became an experience rather than a formation. Some even claimed sinless perfection in this life—an idea neither Scripture nor the Church Fathers ever endorsed. The apostle John warned, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). And Irenaeus, long before Wesley, wrote that humanity is “slowly accustomed to bear the divine,” growing into Christlikeness across a lifetime of obedience.[15]

The Holiness Movement began as a protest against dead orthodoxy. It reminded the world that grace doesn’t just forgive—it transforms. That reminder is still desperately needed. But where Wesley held tension—between grace and effort, progress and humility—his heirs often replaced tension with formula. As one critic wryly observed, “What began as holiness became a hunger for spiritual shortcuts.”

The early church knew no shortcuts. Holiness was not crisis but cruciformity—a daily, often painful conformity to Christ (Luke 9:23). Ignatius wrote his flock urging them to "become more and more humble, as Christ was."[16] Holiness was not an event. It was a road.

Pentecostal Fires

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the Western church was split in two directions—cold rationalism on one side, moralistic religion on the other. Faith had become either intellectual theory or behavioral code. Few expected God to act. Fewer still expected Him to act like He did in the book of Acts.

So in 1906, at a small, dilapidated mission on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, a one-eyed African American holiness preacher named William J. Seymour lit a match. He preached that the baptism of the Holy Spirit—accompanied by tongues, prophecy, and power—was not a relic of the apostolic age, but a promise for modern believers.[17] What happened next would ripple across continents.

Eyewitnesses reported interracial gatherings—Black, White, Latino, immigrants, men and women—all praying side by side, weeping, singing, confessing sin, and speaking in unknown tongues.[21] Newspapers mocked it; some churches condemned it. But others saw in it the rawness of Acts 2—unpolished, unstructured, but undeniably alive. Historian Cecil Robeck calls it "a rebuke to racial segregation, institutional pride, and spiritual dryness."[19]

At its birth, Pentecostalism was not a movement of power for power's sake—it was a cry for God to be present. It restored expectancy. It reminded a weary church that the Spirit was not an idea but a Person. But once again—emphasis became imbalance.

Over time, in many circles, speaking in tongues shifted from a joyful gift into a requirement, even proof of salvation or spiritual legitimacy.[20] The book of Acts became not a witness to what God did, but a template for what God must do—every time, in every believer. Paul's warning to the Corinthians, "Tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers" (1 Cor. 14:22), was largely forgotten. The sign became the standard. Emotion became evidence. Doctrine became secondary. That wasn't how the early church viewed the Spirit.

Tertullian wrote of spiritual gifts as realities but warned that every gift must submit to doctrine and character.[21] Even Chrysostom—who lived when the miraculous gifts had largely ceased—never denied their validity, only their abuse.[22] For the fathers, the Spirit illuminated Scripture, empowered holiness, and unified the Church. Gifts were real—but never detached from the cross.

Pentecostalism was born from hunger for the living God. That hunger was holy. But without theological roots, hunger can become hype. And hype, unchecked, leads to a church chasing the spectacular while neglecting the sacrificial.

The apostles didn't seek fire—they sought Christ, and the fire came. The modern church often seeks fire, and hopes Christ will follow.

Charismatic Renewal & Word of Faith: When Experience Became Formula

By the mid-20th century, Pentecostal fire had leapt beyond storefront churches and revival tents into mainline Protestantism and even Roman Catholicism. This became known as the Charismatic Renewal. It was not a new denomination but a movement within existing churches—Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Catholics—seeking to recover the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit without abandoning liturgy or tradition.[23]

Early Charismatic leaders weren't trying to replace doctrine—they wanted to revive devotion. They kept creeds, sacraments, liturgy, and bishops, but added prayer meetings, prophecy, healing services, and spontaneous worship. In many ways, it was the most balanced expression of modern spiritual renewal: ancient structure, living Spirit. But two diverging paths soon formed. One path remained sacramental and anchored—integrating Spirit and structure. The other path drifted further—eventually birthing what we now call the Word of Faith movement.

This second stream was shaped heavily by televangelists like Kenneth Hagin and later Kenneth Copeland.[24] Their message was simple, compelling, and dangerous: faith is a force, words are spiritual containers, and spoken belief creates reality. As Hagin once wrote, "You can have what you say."[25] Sickness? Speak healing. Poverty? Declare wealth. Doubt? Deny it—audibly—until it flees.

What began as a teaching on confidence in prayer morphed into a system where faith functioned like spiritual physics: say it, believe it, receive it. God, in this framework, becomes less Father and more cosmic contract manager.

The theology had roots—not in Scripture or the early church—but in metaphysical New Thought philosophy and mind-science movements of the late 19th century.[26] It baptized positive thinking and repackaged it in Christian vocabulary. The primary drift? Faith became a tool, not a trust.

Scripture gives a different picture: faith is allegiance to Christ (*pistis*), loyalty unto obedience, not manipulation of outcomes. The earliest Christians did not "name and claim"—

they believed and obeyed, whether they suffered or saw miracles. They prayed like Shadrach: "Our God is able to save us… but even if He does not…" (Dan. 3:17–18).

The prosperity gospel—a child of Word of Faith—took this even further: if you are faithful, you will be wealthy, healthy, influential. If not, the problem is your faith.

Tell that to Paul, who wrote half the New Testament while in chains.

Or to Ignatius, marched to Rome to die.

Or to Polycarp, burned at the stake for refusing to deny Christ.

None of them would have recognized a Christianity where the cross is optional and comfort is guaranteed.

And yet, this drift didn't start in rebellion—it started with real desire. Desire to see God heal the sick. To see faith matter. To believe prayer changes more than mood. Those are holy longings. But severed from the cross and from ecclesial wisdom, good desires became distorted doctrine.

The early church never separated Spirit from suffering, miracles from martyrdom. They held both. The modern church often wants Pentecost without Golgotha.

Hyper-Grace: When Forgiveness Replaced Formation

If the Word of Faith movement redefined faith as a tool, the next wave redefined grace as permission. Often called the hyper-grace movement, this teaching insists that because Christ paid for all sin—past, present, and future—believers no longer need to confess sin, repent, or concern themselves with spiritual discipline. To call Christians to obedience is labeled "legalism." To speak of conviction is "religious guilt."[27]

Its preachers quote Paul: “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20), but they seem to ignore the very next words: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may abound? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1–2). Grace was never designed to excuse sin—it was sent to destroy its reign.

At first, hyper-grace sounded like liberation from shame and fear. And truthfully—some pulpits had turned the gospel into performance, guilt, and anxiety. Hyper-grace wasn’t born in rebellion—it was born in reaction. But where the cure overcorrects, it becomes a new sickness.

What Went Wrong?

Hyper-grace commits three quiet distortions:

1. It confuses forgiveness with transformation. Grace does not merely cancel sin’s penalty—it breaks sin’s power. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation… training us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires” (Titus 2:11–12). Grace doesn’t silence repentance—it teaches it.

2. It replaces repentance with self-affirmation. In the early church, confession (exomologesis) wasn’t theatrical—it was honest agreement with God about reality. Clement of Alexandria wrote that repentance is “the renewal of mind that produces knowledge of truth and hatred of evil.”[28] Today, we are told repentance is anti-gospel. The fathers would disagree.

3. 3. It disconnects Jesus as Savior from Jesus as Lord. Many hyper-grace teachers preach Jesus as forgiver—but not ruler. But the early Christians preached no such divide. Irenaeus and Ignatius both insisted: *If Christ is not your Lord, He is not your Savior.*[29]

Michael Brown summarizes the issue simply: *"Hyper-grace removes the moral demands of the gospel in the name of protecting grace."*[30] That is not grace. That is anesthesia.

What Did the Early Church Say? The earliest fathers didn't treat sin lightly—but neither did they weaponize guilt. Chrysostom warned that those who excuse sin under the name of grace "turn medicine into poison."[31] Polycarp told believers, *"He who raised Christ from the dead will also raise us—if we do His will."*[32] The Didache (c. 100 AD) told new converts to confess sins "so that your sacrifice may be pure."[33]

Grace to them was not a couch—it was a call.

The Real Scandal of Grace

The scandal of grace isn't that God forgives everything. It's that He forgives and then commands: "Follow Me." It is free—but never cheap. It costs us our autonomy. Hyper-grace tries to keep the cross of Christ while removing the cross we are called to carry.
But Jesus never said, "Admire Me." He said, "Die with Me."

Case Studies in Modern Drift

Free Grace & Easy-Believism

If hyper-grace softened holiness in the name of love, the Free Grace movement weakened discipleship in the name of assurance.

Born largely within 20th-century Evangelicalism and championed by figures like Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie at Dallas Theological Seminary, Free Grace theology began with a pastoral concern: how can a believer know they're truly saved?[34] Legalistic preaching had left many Christians doubting their salvation daily, terrified of losing it. The impulse to restore

assurance was good. But in simplifying salvation to solve anxiety, the movement oversimplified Scripture itself.

What Free Grace Teaches

- Salvation is secured by a single moment of belief.
- Repentance is "changing your mind about Jesus," not necessarily turning from sin.
- Discipleship, obedience, and holiness are optional—important but unrelated to salvation.
- A believer who never grows, never repents, and never obeys is still fully saved—just "unfruitful."[35]

In other words: faith = mental agreement, not embodied loyalty.

This is what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call "cheap grace"—grace without obedience, faith without discipleship, baptism without cross.[36]

Why This Is a Drift

The problem isn't the desire for assurance. It's the redefinition of faith itself. In Scripture and the early church, pistis (faith) was not mere belief—it was allegiance.[37] It meant fidelity, loyalty, covenant faithfulness. To believe in Christ was to belong to Christ—body, soul, and future.

James is blunt: "Faith without works is dead." (Jas. 2:26). Not injured. Not immature. Dead.

Paul doesn't disagree with James—he agrees. He writes of "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5, 16:26) as one reality, not two steps.

The earliest Christian voices echo this:

- Clement of Rome rebukes believers who "boast of faith while failing in works."[38]
- Ignatius says: *"It is better to be silent and be, than to talk and not be. Faith and love are everything—nothing is better than them."*[39]
- Justin Martyr insists salvation is for those who "live in a way consistent with Christ's teaching."[40]

Not one early Christian taught that a fruitless faith was still saving faith. That idea would have been unthinkable.

The Pastoral Cost

Free Grace wasn't born in rebellion—it was born in fear. Fear of legalism. Fear of never being "enough." Many pastors wanted to comfort the anxious soul, and rightly so. But in removing obedience as essential to faith, the movement accidentally produced a Christianity where:

- The cross saves you, but never reshapes you.
- Jesus can be Savior, but not necessarily Lord.
- Church becomes a nursery, not a training ground for holiness.

And so, churches filled with converts—yet starved of disciples.

What the Apostles Would Say

The apostolic pattern was different. Come and die, and you will live; not come and agree, and you will be safe.

Christ did not invite admirers. He called followers.

Sinless Perfection: Resurrection Without the Cross

If hyper-grace downplays sin, the doctrine of sinless perfection denies it altogether. This teaching—primarily an offshoot of Wesleyan Holiness theology—claims that a believer can reach a state of complete moral purity in this life. No intentional sin. No inward rebellion. Some even teach that, after a second spiritual experience, a Christian can live entirely free from sinful desire.

Let's be fair, Wesley himself never claimed to be sinless. His term "Christian perfection" meant a heart fully governed by love, not a life free from every mistake or weakness.[41] But by the late 19th century, his careful distinctions were flattened into slogans, camp-meeting testimonies, and eventually, theological systems.

What began as a hunger for holiness became a denial of reality.

Why It Sounds Holy (and Why It Isn't)

Perfectionism sounds like seriousness about sanctification. It insists we shouldn't settle for lukewarm Christianity, or use "nobody's perfect" as an excuse for apathy. That part is right. But then it makes a fatal leap: from "we must pursue holiness" to "I no longer sin at all."
The problem isn't desire—it's timing.

The New Testament never promises sinlessness before resurrection. Instead, it promises participation in Christ's suffering now, and in His perfection later.
Paul writes like a man at war, not at rest:

> "The good that I want, I do not do… wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:19, 24)

And John leaves no ambiguity:

> "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

The early Christians didn't teach sinless perfection either. Quite the opposite.

- Irenaeus—who rarely underestimated holiness—said we are "slowly accustomed to bear the divine," but never claimed perfection in this life.[42]
- Clement of Alexandria described sanctification as "continual progress," not final arrival.[43]
- Augustine said bluntly: *"If perfection were already ours, the Church's prayer for forgiveness would be meaningless."*[44]

Even those who walked closest to the apostles never claimed moral flawlessness. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was 86 when he was martyred. He did not say, "I have no sin." He said, "How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" — and died still dependent on grace.

Why This Drift Is Dangerous

Sinless perfection isn't just wrong—it's pastoral poison. It leads to:

- Pride in those who think they've arrived.
- Despair in those who try and fail.
- Hypocrisy in those who fake it to fit in.

Worst of all, it bypasses the cross. If you don't sin, you no longer need a Savior—just a witness.

The Apostolic Alternative

The New Testament calls us to holiness—but holiness that limps. Not perfection, but progress. Not sinlessness, but Spirit-led struggle. Not "I no longer sin," but "I walk in the light,

and the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin." (1 John 1:7) In other words: Christ is perfect for us—until He is perfect in us.

That happens not at the altar call, but at the resurrection.

Calvinism: Sovereignty Without Synergy?

If the previous movements risked making grace too soft, Calvinism risks making it too mechanical.

Rooted in the writings of Augustine and later systematized by John Calvin in the 16th century, Calvinism is built on one driving conviction: God saves completely, or not at all. His grace is not an invitation—it's an intervention.

Summarized later as TULIP, Calvin's theology asserts:

- Total Depravity — humans can do nothing to turn to God.
- Unconditional Election — God chooses some to be saved, not based on merit but divine will.
- Limited Atonement — Christ died only for the elect, not for all humanity.
- Irresistible Grace — those whom God chooses cannot finally resist His call.
- Perseverance of the Saints — those truly saved will endure to the end.[45]

This system is airtight, logical, and deeply comforting—if you're one of the elect. But is it apostolic?

Where It Holds Truth

Let's be clear—Calvinism is not a heresy. It contains truths the Church must never lose:

•. We are powerless to save ourselves.

•. Grace is not earned or deserved.

•. God is not reacting to human decisions; He authors salvation.

Paul affirms God's initiative: "He chose us before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). The problem is not what Calvinism affirms—but what it excludes.

Where It Drifts

The fatal drift comes when sovereignty is defined in a way that suffocates human freedom, responsibility, and love. The early church did not believe God predestines individuals to salvation or damnation apart from their will. They saw salvation as synergy—divine grace and human response working together, never in competition.

- Irenaeus: "God made man free from the beginning… to obey or to disobey."[46]
- Justin Martyr: "If humans were not free to choose, there would be no reward for virtue nor punishment for vice."[47]
- John Chrysostom: "If God predestined some to damnation, why did He command all to repent?"[48]
- Maximus the Confessor later called salvation "the dance between divine energy and human assent."

Where Calvin insists grace is irresistible, the early fathers insist grace is offered—but may be resisted.

Limited Atonement and the Cross

Perhaps the sharpest break with the early church is limited atonement—the belief that Christ died only for the elect.

The New Testament speaks otherwise:

- "Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all." (1 Tim. 2:6)
- "He is the propitiation… for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2)
- "God so loved the world…" (John 3:16)

Even Augustine never claimed Christ died only for the elect. That was Calvin's development.

Why People Embrace It

Calvinism appeals because it gives certainty in an uncertain world. If God does everything—including belief—then nothing depends on us. No striving, no anxiety. Grace is mathematically secure.

But love cannot be reduced to a system. And salvation, in the New Testament, is never passive. It is invitation, covenant, warfare. Paul did not preach: "You might already be elect—relax." He preached: "Repent. Believe. Walk worthy. Endure."

The Apostolic Balance

The early church held two truths that Calvinism separates: God is absolutely sovereign. Human beings are genuinely responsible. Not 50/50. Not compromise. 100/100.

God begins salvation. God sustains it. But we must respond, persevere, remain faithful. This is not works-righteousness. This is covenant.

Other Doctrines of Drift

These remaining movements may seem wildly different—some deny the Trinity, others commercialize the gospel—but they all follow the same pattern: they begin with a question the Church failed to answer well, then answer it by discarding apostolic boundaries. The problem isn't always that they ask the wrong question—it's that they abandon the right foundation.

Oneness Pentecostalism: Passion Without Trinity

Born in the early 20th century out of the Pentecostal revival, Oneness Pentecostalism rejected historic Trinitarian doctrine and insisted that "Father, Son, and Spirit" are not three persons but three modes or roles of Jesus.[49] It seemed to protect God's oneness and Christ's divinity—but at the cost of collapsing the persons of the Trinity.

Yet the earliest Christians—before creeds, before councils—already baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Didache 7.1).[50] Ignatius called Jesus "our God" while still speaking to the Father and Spirit distinctly.[51] Oneness theology was not a return to early Christianity—it was a return to an ancient heresy: Sabellianism.

Prosperity Gospel: The Cross Replaced by a Contract

The Prosperity Gospel—a child of Word of Faith teaching—reduces divine blessing to health, wealth, and success. If you're sick or struggling, the implication is clear: your faith is defective.[52] God becomes a celestial vending machine—insert belief, receive breakthrough.

But the apostles did not preach Christ crucified so Christians could avoid sorrow—they preached Christ crucified so suffering could be redeemed. Paul didn't measure faith by prosperity; he measured it by perseverance: "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." (Gal. 6:17) The prosperity gospel doesn't just drift—it inverts the cross.

Mormonism: Restoration by Reinvention

Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) with a claim that true Christianity had vanished after the apostles and needed full restoration through new revelation.[53] Yet rather than restoring Christianity, Mormon doctrine rewrote it entirely:

humans can become gods, God was once a man, and Scripture is supplemented with the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and more.

Smith famously preached, *"God himself was once as we are now."*[54] But Isaiah records God saying the opposite: "Before Me no god was formed, nor will there be after Me." (Isa. 43:10) This is not reformation—it is reinvention.

Jehovah's Witnesses: A Different Jesus

Founded by Charles Taze Russell in the 1870s, Jehovah's Witnesses began as a Bible study group disillusioned with denominationalism. Their core teaching? Jesus is not eternal God, but a created being—"a god," not the God.[55] Their translation of John 1:1 ("the Word was a god") has been rejected by every major Greek scholar.[56]

Ignatius of Antioch—only a generation after John—wrote plainly: *"Jesus Christ our God."*[57] The apostolic church didn't worship a mighty angel—it worshiped the crucified God.

Universalism, Hebrew Roots, and New-Age Christianities

These movements vary widely, but their drift follows a similar trajectory. Each begins by pointing to something the Church has forgotten, but ends up discarding something the apostles never abandoned—holiness, repentance, judgment, Trinity, or the exclusivity of Christ.

The Common Thread

These doctrines don't collapse because they lack sincerity—they collapse because they loosen themselves from the apostolic anchor. Sincerity is not the test of truth. Fidelity is.

The Enemy's Consistent Strategy

From Eden onward, the devil's preferred weapon has not been full-blown denial of the truth—it has been distortion of it. He rarely turns the people of God in the opposite direction. He

nudges them just a few degrees off course, knowing that over time and generations, a few degrees becomes a different gospel.

The Oldest Tactic: Edit, Don't Erase

In Genesis, the serpent does not reject God's word. He revises it. "Did God really say…?" (Gen. 3:1) He doesn't silence revelation. He reframes it. Subtle. Reasonable. Poisoned.

The same strategy appears again in the wilderness when Satan tempts Jesus—not with lies, but with Scripture taken out of context.[58] Even at the end of Scripture, Revelation warns of anyone who "adds to or takes away from the words of this book" (Rev. 22:18–19). Drift is not about burning Bibles. It's about bending them.

The Strategy in Three Steps

Across movements, cultures, and centuries, the same pattern emerges: Evil doesn't need to create falsehood to win—it only needs to make truth unbalanced.

Why the Church Keeps Falling for This? Because imbalance is easier than tension. It's easier to preach grace without repentance than grace that trains us to deny ungodliness. It's easier to preach sovereignty without human responsibility than to live with mystery. It's easier to perform spiritual gifts than to cultivate spiritual fruit. It's easier to seek power than to endure suffering.

The apostles refused the easy road. They held paradoxes together:

- •. Faith and works.
- •. Spirit and order.
- •. Suffering and glory.
- •. Already and not yet.

The early fathers did the same. Ignatius wrote that the Church must be "unshakably united in faith and love."[59] Irenaeus insisted that heresy usually begins by "affirming one part of the truth while rejecting the rest."[60]

Spiritual Warfare Is Subtle Warfare

Modern Christians often imagine spiritual warfare as exorcisms, pagan rituals, or political persecution. But most of the devil's victories don't come with horns and smoke. They come with pulpits, microphones, bestselling books, and half-true sermons. Paul warned Timothy:

> "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but will accumulate teachers to suit their passions." (2 Tim. 4:3)[61]

Not atheism. Teachers. Not silence. Noise.

The Way Forward Is Not Panic — but Return

We don't respond by rejecting passion, or experience, or tradition, or intellect. The answer to misuse is not disuse—it's right use. The enemy twists good things. God redeems them.

The antidote to drift is not innovation, but recalibration—to the apostles, to Scripture, to the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). Not reimagined. Re-centered.

The answer is not to burn it all down and start a new church. It's not to pretend we can rewind history to the year A.D. 50. And it's certainly not to chase some romanticized version of "the early church" while ignoring real human messiness in Paul's letters or Ignatius' warnings. Returning is not nostalgia, it is repentance. It is a turning—not backward into an era, but backward into a foundation.

Return Does Not Mean Rebuild the First Century. It Means Recover What They Refused to Let Go Of. The early Christians didn't have perfect buildings, programs, or even doctrinal uniformity on every secondary point. But they shared three irreducible convictions:

- Jesus is Lord — not conceptually, but covenantally.
- His authority structured their lives, ethics, worship, and hope. Lord was not a title they admired; it was a claim they obeyed.
- Faith and obedience were inseparable.
- Believing meant following. Grace meant transformation. Baptism meant death and resurrection—new allegiance, new family, new future.
- The Church was a people, not a product. Not consumers. Not passive spectators. A people who ate together, suffered together, confessed sin together, and guarded each other's souls.

That is what must be recovered.

So, What Does Return Look Like Now? Not vague idealism. Not "just love Jesus more." It's far more concrete: The Return Is Not a Program—It's Allegiance

This is not about creating a "New Apostolic Church" movement or chasing some perfect liturgy. The early church didn't have a single style—house churches in Rome didn't look like assemblies in Antioch. What united them was not form—it was fidelity.

The call now is the same as Jesus' first sermon and His final warning to Ephesus:

"Repent and do the works you did at first." (Rev. 2:5)[62]

Not feel what you felt. Do what you did. It Will Cost Us Something Returning will cost us:

- Our pride (because it admits we've drifted).
- Our comfort (because the cross still hurts).
- Our autonomy (because Jesus still says, "Follow Me.")

But it will give us back something far better: roots deeper than culture, churches that produce disciples, not consumers and a faith worth suffering for again.

The Future of the Church Is Found at Its Source. We do not move forward by becoming more clever, more relevant, more marketable. We move forward by going deeper—into the faith once delivered to the saints. Not revised or rebranded, but re-centered.

End Notes

[1] Early witnesses such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp.

[2] Hurtado, Wright, Bauckham, and Dunn's work on early Christian belief and practice.

[3] Jude 1:3 — "contend for the faith once delivered to the saints."

[4] Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Corinthians; 1 Corinthians 1:10–12.

[5] Irenaeus warned that heretics "take a single thread of truth and weave it with many falsehoods" (Against Heresies 1.1).

[6] Genesis 3:1–5 — Satan subtly modifies God's command rather than denying it outright.

[7] Context: English Civil Wars (1642–1651), collapse of religious trust.

[8] George Fox, Journal, 1652/1952, 47.

[9] Abandonment of sacraments in early Quaker communities—see Fox's rejection of outward ordinances.

[10] Rufus Jones, The Faith and Practice of the Quakers, viii.

[11] Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Magnesians 7; emphasis on unity over private interpretation.

[12] Context: 18th-century Anglican decline and rise of Methodism.

[13] John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, 1777, 84.

[14] Phoebe Palmer, The Way of Holiness (1845); Asa Mahan, Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection (1839).

[15] Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.38.3.

[16] Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 10–12.

[17] William J. Seymour, Apostolic Faith newspaper, 1906.

[18] Eyewitness accounts of Azusa Street gatherings, various.

[19] Cecil M. Robeck, The Azusa Street Mission and Revival, 112.

[20] Shift to tongues as mandatory proof—see Assemblies of God doctrinal statements (early 20th c.).

[21] Tertullian, Against Marcion 5.8.

[22] John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, esp. on 1 Cor. 12–14.

[23] The Charismatic Renewal began among Episcopalians (Dennis Bennett, 1960) and Roman Catholics (Duquesne University, 1967).

[24] Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts as major Word of Faith architects.

[25] Hagin, The Tongue: A Creative Force (1974), 8.

[26] D. R. McConnell, A Different Gospel, 22 — tracing roots to metaphysical cults like Christian Science and New Thought.

[27] Michael Brown, Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message, 2014.

[28] Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 2.13.

[29] Ignatius, Letter to the Magnesians 1; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.36.

[30] Brown, Hyper-Grace, 22.

[31] Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans 10.

[32] Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians 2.

[33] Didache 4–14.

[34] Zane Hodges, The Gospel Under Siege; Charles Ryrie, So Great Salvation.

[35] Hodges on “carnal Christians” and “unfruitful believers.”

[36] Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 47.

[37] Matthew W. Bates, Salvation by Allegiance Alone, esp. 75–102.

[38] 1 Clement 30.

[39] Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 14.

[40] Justin Martyr, First Apology 16.

[41] John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, esp. chapters on “inward sin.”

[42] Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.38.3.

[43] Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 7.14.

[44] Augustine, Enchiridion 71.

[45] The TULIP acronym appeared after Calvin—earliest use at Synod of Dort (1618–19).

[46] Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.37.1.

[47] Justin Martyr, First Apology 43.

[48] Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans 18.

[49] Early origins at the 1913 Arroyo Seco Camp Meeting; rejection of Trinitarian baptism.

[50] Didache 7.1 — earliest Christian manual of worship.

[51] Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 1; Magnesians 13.

[52] See Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, prosperity-focused televangelism.

[53] Joseph Smith, Articles of Faith, introduction to Mormonism.

[54] Smith, King Follett Discourse (1844).

[55] Charles Taze Russell, Studies in the Scriptures.

[56] Bruce Metzger, Walter Martin, and other NT scholars critiquing NWT translation.

[57] Ignatius, Epistle to the Ephesians 18.

[58] Matthew 4:5–7 — Satan quotes Psalm 91 to Jesus.

[59] Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 13.

[60] Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.1.

[61] 2 Timothy 4:3. Conclusion: What Returning Actually Looks Like

[62] Revelation 2:5 — Christ's call to the drifting church of Ephesus.