

# **When People Walk Away From the Faith**

An Examination of Personal Apostasy,  
and the Possibility of Losing One's Salvation

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## When People Walk Away From the Faith

Digital build: 20170128

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Published by **Biblical Reader Communications**  
(www.BiblicalReaderCommunications.com) Raleigh, NC

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(Print Edition ISBN-13: 978-1478335580)

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## The Permanence of Salvation

When a person exercises genuine faith in Christ, the process of salvation that is begun is irreversible; it is impossible for a person, once redeemed and regenerated, to ever be lost again. The two views on this subject, the view of divine sovereignty, represented imperfectly in classic Calvinism, and the free will view (represented in Arminianism), see man's nature and capabilities, and the process of salvation in fundamentally different ways; and as one might expect, they hold divergent views regarding the permanence of salvation. The view of divine sovereignty is that God initiates faith and secures man's salvation. Arminians believe that man initiates faith by an act of free will enabled by common grace, and thus, man procures his own salvation, but that salvation is only secure as long the person, through his or her free will, continues to exercise faith. Hence, while those who believe in divine sovereignty believe in eternal security (the permanence of salvation), Arminians generally believe in a doctrine called "the security of the believer," by which they mean that a person is secure as long as he or she remains a believer. Obviously these views should not be confused. The Bible teaches that God is absolutely sovereign in both the initiation and continuance of salvation. Such a view is the only view compatible with total depravity, unconditional election, and eternal security.

There are a number of reasons why a saved person can never become lost. Those reasons relate both to the nature of saving faith and to the preserving work of each of the members of the Trinity. It is important to understand that this truth is not intended to suggest that believers are free to live unrighteous lives. Rather, an appreciation of this

truth should cause us to acknowledge a great debt, as we realize that we have not saved ourselves, nor can we by our own efforts add anything to the grace freely given to us. We are saved, now and always, for one reason: because of what God has done (Rom. 9:16). This ought to be a very humbling truth.

### **The case for eternal security**

While much biblical support could be produced in support of eternal security, the following argument is, perhaps, the simplest proof. In order for a saved person to become lost one of two things would need to happen: either, the saved person would have to be separated from God by something other than himself, or he would have to separate himself from God. According to Paul in Romans 8:31-39, the first option is not possible. Paul said:

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; <sup>34</sup> who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> Just as it is written, " FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."

<sup>37</sup>But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NASB)

Paul clearly included everything in his list of things that can never separate a believer from Christ. He even said that nothing in the present or future can separate us from Christ, and he included things physical, circumstances, supernatural powers, and even the continuation of life itself. The second option is also impossible because the saved person is himself, or herself, included in the things Paul lists. In other words, when Paul said that nothing is able to separate a believer from Christ, he was excluding everything, including the believer himself. John also addressed this point in 1 John 2:18-19, when he said that those who profess Christ, only to renounce their profession, were never genuinely saved. Had they been saved, they would not have returned to a state of unbelief. The logical implication is clear: one of the fundamental qualities of saving faith is that it perseveres to completion.

Why is it that a saved person cannot lose his or her salvation? The answer is that God is at work to bring the believer's salvation to completion. Note in the following passages how each member of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is involved in preserving the child of God.

a. *The preserving work of the Father*

1. It is God's responsibility to bring salvation to the point of completion Paul says in Philippians 1:6: "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus*" (NASB).

2. God will not allow a saved person to reach the point of perdition (lostness). Again note Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:28-33 and [also 5:5]: "*But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another*" (NASB). In the Corinthian Church God took the lives of some believers in order to prevent their complete apostasy. This is both a sober warning and an indication of the length God will go to to keep a person saved. Note also Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 5:5 where he said: "*I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*" Here Paul was speaking of a wayward brother. The interesting point here is that the purpose of Paul's determination to deliver this man over to death, was the preservation of his soul, *i.e.*, his salvation. Suffice it to say that God will do whatever is necessary to keep his child safe from eternal destruction, which is what the loss of salvation would mean.



b. *The preserving work of the Son*

1. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for all sin, for all time (Heb. 10:14). The unknown writer of Hebrews said in Hebrews 10:14: "For by one offering He [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (NASB, explanation in brackets added). When Christ's sacrifice becomes effective for an individual (*i.e.*, at the moment they exercise faith), it perfects the believing individual forever, not just until something happens or they change their mind. Some things simply can't be undone, and some choices can't be taken back; the Bible indicates that the choice to accept Christ by faith is one of those irrevocable life choices.

2. Christ's high priestly ministry ensures forever the salvation of those who come to him. Again, the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 7:25: "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (NASB). What does this mean? For one thing it means that if a believer were to lose his, or her, salvation, it would be a failure in Christ's High Priestly ministry. How likely do you think that is? Salvation, once obtained, isn't for a season, until something changes; it's forever.

c. *The preserving work of the Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit places the believer into Christ and seals him, or her, unto the day of redemption (*i.e.*, until their salvation is completed when Christ appears and they are changed into his likeness, cf. Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). Paul said in Ephesians 1:13-14 (cf. 4:30): "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with [by] the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a

pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory" (NASB, explanation in brackets added). The purpose of sealing is to preserve something unspoiled. Every believer is in Christ, and Christ is in the Father (Jn. 10:28-30); the Holy Spirit has sealed them there and all three members of the Godhead are intent on preserving believers until their redemption is finally completed. We can sum this up with a simple question: If a sheep gets lost, whose fault is it, the sheep, or the shepherd? One of the major pitfalls in understanding this truth is that we tend to forget who is who, and who has what ability and responsibility. We are just sheep; God is our shepherd. If a child of God were to be lost, it would be God's fault; which is precisely why it can never happen. It has never happened in the past, and it will never happen in the future. If you're reading this book and you're concerned that you might lose, or might have lost, your salvation, let me assure you that you will not be the first person in history to do so; it simply can't happen. Of course there are many passages in the New Testament that have been misconstrued to imply that such has, or could happen. When we look at those passages in the next chapter we'll see that that simply isn't the case. Of course, this truth isn't a license to sin; when correctly understood it should lead one to profound humility, thankfulness, worship, and a sincerely desire to please the one who has been so gracious to us.

### **Passages frequently misunderstood**

Some New Testament passages have been misunderstood to imply that a saved person could return to a lost state. While we cannot cover all of the passages in this brief treatment, some representative types are discussed below.

*a. Passages describing personal apostasy are often misunderstood as applying to believers*

Most of the difficulty involves a misunderstanding of personal apostasy. (This subject will be discussed in more detail further along.) Virtually every New Testament book mentions personal apostasy. The early church, like the present-day church, attracted many people who had not genuinely yielded their lives to Christ. These people became part of the local churches, and some even became leaders. In time some of these reformed, but untransformed individuals turned back from their profession of faith, returning to their previous religion, or going on to the next. They had heard the gospel and known the truth (intellectually), but they had never trusted the Savior. They had come to the full knowledge of who Christ is, even experiencing a measure of sanctification through exposure to biblical truth and observing the power of the Holy Spirit working in the midst of the church, but they had never taken the plunge of personal faith. We could describe them as “reformed,” but not “transformed.” Because this was a widespread problem, those in the local churches who professed faith were exhorted to make sure their faith was genuine (2 Cor. 13:5); such warnings to the local churches and exhortations were not intended to create doubts in the minds of believers about whether they were saved; they were intended simply to urge all who profess faith to make sure that they actually do possess it, which of course, is evidenced by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It is important to understand that apostates were never saved in the first place; they renounce their profession of faith because they never actually possess genuine, saving faith. When they turn away from their profession, these individuals are doing what is in keeping with their true nature

of unbelief. (2 Peter 2:22, one of the principal passages on personal apostasy, uses the illustrations of a dog returning to its vomit, and a pig returning to the mud.) A doctrinal problem arises when people read these warnings and mistakenly assume that these individuals were once saved. Some of the primary passages describing personal apostasy are: 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Peter 2:1-22; Hebrews 3:1-14; 6:4-12; 10:26-31; 12:14-29; John 15:1-6, cf. Mt. 13:1-43, the parables of the kingdom of Heaven. (Some of these passages will be discussed further along.)

*b. Negotiating grammatical difficulties*

There are some passages that are misinterpreted to imply loss of salvation because of confusion over what the passage actually says; Colossians 1:21-23 is a good example. The key to the interpretation of this passage is the conditional particle (Gr. *ei*, meaning "if"), which in the original is in the indicative mood, not the subjunctive mood, and should be translated "since." When the grammar is correctly understood, the meaning is quite clear. Paul wasn't suggesting that some of the Colossians might run the risk of losing their salvation; he was confident they actually did possess genuine faith. Far from introducing doubts about their salvation, Paul was actually extolling their faith.

## Personal Apostasy

If a saved person can't lose their salvation, then how do we explain all the warnings in the New Testament about departing from the faith? The answer lies in understanding the doctrine of personal apostasy. Personal apostasy is a prominent teaching in the New Testament; and, quite interestingly, it's discussed or alluded to in almost every book. In fact, it's the major theme of at least two New Testament books: 1 John and Hebrews. An understanding of personal apostasy is essential to the proper interpretation of many New Testament passages. What is personal apostasy? Personal apostasy refers to an individual falling away from their profession of faith in Christ. The key question concerning these individuals is whether they were ever genuinely saved. Since many passages indicate that apostasy inevitably results in eternal damnation, this issue is of considerable importance. (Personal apostasy is called "personal" to distinguish it from the apostasy of an entire institution, such as a church or other institution.)

### Personal apostasy defined

The word "apostasy" comes indirectly from a Greek word that appears in 1 Timothy 4:1. The word *aphistēmi* (translated "fall away" in the NASB) is the verb form of "*apostasia*" from which we transliterate the English "apostasy." The idea is to depart from something. The significance of a departure is, of course, determined by the context, *i.e.*, what one is departing from. In 2 Timothy 2:19 Paul uses this word to encourage Christians to depart from evil (the NASB says, "abstain"), whereas in Hebrews 3:12

the author uses it to warn people not to fall away from the living God. Obviously, departing from sin, and departing from God are actions that result in very different consequences. It is important to recognize that the occurrence of the word *apostasia*, or other related terms, doesn't necessarily indicate that a passage is referring to personal apostasy. Likewise, apostasy is frequently described in passages where the term is not used. Some of the key passages in the New Testament dealing with apostasy are: 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Hebrews 3:1-19; 6:4-8, 10:26-31, 12:14-29, 2 Peter 2, 1 John 1-3, and Jude 5-16.

### **Personal apostasy described**

The description of apostasy given in the New Testament is of an individual who, while fully understanding the truth of the gospel and having at one time professed faith in Christ, ultimately falls away from his, or her, profession. As we will see when we come to the New Testament passages describing personal apostasy, this happens because they were never genuinely saved. We must be careful not to confuse "the faith" (the gospel) with personal faith (a personal choice). Apostates defect from "the faith," because they have no personal, saving faith in Christ.

The Greek and Roman world was not a friendly place prior to the influence of Christianity; it could be very cruel, and the social effects were everywhere to be seen, from the exposure of unwanted infants and the elderly, to rampant moral degradation even under the guise of religious worship. Where Christianity penetrated this darkness, there were people who were attracted to the life of local churches and the care that Christians showed to one

another; there were also those who saw the church as an institution to be exploited. Whatever the case, many people associated themselves with Christianity who had never genuinely yielded to Christ, resulting in regeneration. Christ foretold this gradual infiltration by unbelievers in his parables recorded in Matthew 13. Some of these individuals eventually returned to their former religion, or went on to the next religion. This phenomenon was perplexing and distressing to the churches. As a result, there are numerous references and explanations, as well as warnings concerning apostasy throughout the New Testament. Unfortunately, the modern church has largely lost sight of this teaching, and the result has been confusion and incorrect interpretation of many New Testament passages. Lack of a clear understanding of personal apostasy is also at the heart of much of the divide between Calvinists and Arminians, though there are other important differences as well. The following are some of the major New Testament passages describing or warning against personal apostasy.

### *1 Timothy 4:1-3*

<sup>1</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, <sup>3</sup>*men* who forbid marriage *and* advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (NASB)

Here Paul described an apostate as one who departs from “the faith” (v. 1). Some have mistakenly taken Paul’s statement to mean that these individuals were previously saved. However, this is a reference to a departure from the

gospel itself, not from personal faith. We must not confuse “the faith” with personal faith in Christ (cf. Jude 3); “the faith” refers to the body of truth (inclusive of the gospel) that defines Christianity; personal faith (*i.e.*, “saving faith”) is submission to the gospel (cf. 1 Pt. 1:22; 2:8; 3:1; 4:17). Of course, in order for someone to depart from the faith, they must have professed to believe the faith at one time. In other words, an apostate is one who professes to believe the truth for a while, but later turns from their profession. There is no way to tell from a profession alone if the faith professed is genuine; true faith can only be seen through a transformed life.

## 2 Peter 2:1-22

<sup>1</sup>But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. <sup>2</sup>Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; <sup>3</sup>and in *their* greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. <sup>4</sup>For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; <sup>5</sup>and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; <sup>6</sup>and *if* He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly *lives*



thereafter; <sup>7</sup> and *if* He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men <sup>8</sup> (for by what he saw and heard *that* righteous man, while living among them, felt *his* righteous soul tormented day after day by *their* lawless deeds), <sup>9</sup> *then* the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, <sup>10</sup> and especially those who indulge the flesh in *its* corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, <sup>11</sup> whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. <sup>12</sup> But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, <sup>13</sup> suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, <sup>14</sup> having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; <sup>15</sup> forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the *son* of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; <sup>16</sup> but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, *for* a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. <sup>17</sup> These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. <sup>18</sup> For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they

entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, <sup>19</sup> promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. <sup>20</sup> For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. <sup>21</sup> For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. <sup>22</sup> It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,” and, “A sow, after washing, *returns* to wallowing in the mire.”

Peter described the same type of person that Paul described in 1 Timothy 4:1-3. Notice the similarity: 1) In verse 15, he “forsakes” (relinquishes) the right way. 2) In verse 20, after escaping the defilements of the world by the knowledge (*epignosis*) of the Lord and Savior, he reverts back to those defilements. The question we need to answer is whether there is any indication in this passage that the individuals described were once saved, and there are three lines of evidence that clearly indicate Peter was not talking about people who were once saved.

The first line of evidence is found in 2 Peter 2:20. Peter said: “...the last state has become worse for them than the first.” Verse 21 defines the two states to which verse 20 refers; the first state is: “...not to have known the way of righteousness.” The second state is: “...having known it, to turn away.” If we took this statement to refer to saved

people, Peter would be saying that these individuals were better off before they were saved, which could not be true. In light of that, it should be fairly obvious that this passage cannot refer to people who were once saved. No matter what kind of Christian a person might be, it could never be truly said of them that they were better off before they were saved. The Arminian view of this passage is that the people described were saved and lost their salvation, in which case they certainly would be worse off, but not worse off than they were before they knew the gospel as this passage says, only worse off than before they lost their salvation. However, Peter said they are worse off than before they knew the gospel. What does that mean? The idea Peters seems to be conveying is that these individuals were better off before they turned away from the truth because up to that point they could have exercised faith and been saved, but now they have rejected the truth, rendering themselves with no recourse.

The second line of evidence is found in verse 22. What does the proverb of the dog returning to its vomit mean? A dog returns to its vomit because that's a dog's nature. Why does a pig wallow in the mud? Because wallowing in the mud is a pig's nature. Giving a pig a bath doesn't change its nature. This proverb simply illustrates the difference between external reformation and inner transformation. Even having experienced a measure of personal reformation, a person headed for apostasy turns away from the faith because he, or she, was never transformed through genuine faith in Christ. Personal reformation may involve both attitudes and actions (soul and body) but does not involve a renewed spirit, as does transformation. When these individuals depart from the faith and deny the Savior, they are simply doing what is consistent with their

nature; they may have appeared to be saved from what could be seen from the outside, but Peter's message is that their nature was never changed. For some, that true nature will display itself in overt apostasy (cf. Luke 11:24-28), while for others, they will remain as "hidden reefs" within the local church (Jude 12). While apostasy may be perplexing and disheartening, it is the hidden reefs who pose the greater danger to the local church, especially if they serve in positions of leadership.

The third line of evidence in 2 Peter 2:1-22 indicating that these individuals were never saved can be inferred from the doctrine of eternal security. These individuals couldn't have been saved because a saved person can't lose their salvation. (See the prior discussion.) Note the final disposition of these individuals: Verse 1 says that they will be "destroyed" (Gr. *apollumi*, means, "to destroy utterly," i.e., a total and final destruction); this is the same term that is translated "perish" in John 3:16, where the ones perishing are set in bold contrast to the saved. Note that in Matthew 15:24 *apollumi* is translated "lost"; the idea is that lostness indicates a future of eternal damnation. In 2 Peter 2:9, Peter indicated that these individuals will be kept under punishment for the day of judgment. In 2:17 he said: "the black darkness has been reserved" for them. This phrase, composed of six Greek words, is repeated in only one other place in the New Testament: Jude 13. A comparison of Jude 5-13 indicates that Jude was speaking in reference to the same sort of people Peter had in mind. Note that Jude adds the word "forever" in his description of their destiny apart from God, clearly indicating their eternally lost condition.

Hebrews 3:1-14

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; <sup>2</sup>He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. <sup>3</sup>For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. <sup>4</sup>For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. <sup>5</sup>Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; <sup>6</sup>but Christ *was faithful* as a Son over His house— whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

<sup>7</sup> Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says,

“ TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,

<sup>8</sup> DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY  
PROVOKED ME,

AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS,

<sup>9</sup> WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED *Me* BY TESTING *Me*,  
AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS.

<sup>10</sup> “ THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS  
GENERATION,

AND SAID, ‘THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR  
HEART,

AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS’;

<sup>11</sup> AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH,

‘THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.’”

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (NASB)

There are three major views on the meaning of this and the other related passages in Hebrews (6:4-14; 10:26-31; 12:14-29). The first view is that these passages are warnings to Christians not to live carnally. According to this view the "rest" referred to in Hebrews 3:18-4:13 doesn't illustrate salvation, but the rest a believer enters into when he, or she, learns to trust and obey God; thus it denotes a level of spiritual attainment. Proponents of this view argue that if the rest mentioned here, which Israel failed to enter, represents salvation, it would imply that even Moses wasn't saved, since he didn't enter the Promised Land either. This objection fails to take into account the fact that Israel in the wilderness is used here only analogically. Israel's failure in the wilderness isn't used here as an example of personal apostasy, but an analogy. There's a difference in saying that something is analogous to a particular thing (That is, like a particular thing in some way), and in saying that it is an example (*i.e.*, the very thing itself). The second view is an Arminian (free will) view that these passages are warnings to Christians not to apostatize, and thus forfeit their salvation. The case will be made here that the correct view is that these passages are warnings to people in the church about the danger of failing to take possession of salvation (*i.e.*, the failure to go all the way in exercising saving faith), thus falling beyond hope into unbelief. When we come to Hebrews 6:4-8, we will note an additional view, the hypothetical view, with respect to that passage.

The major problem that must be dealt with in Hebrews 3:1-14 is determining who is addressed. In verse 1 the address is clearly to “holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling,” and in verse 6 to the house of God (in so many words). Again, in verse 12 they are referred to as “brethren.” There can be no doubt that these are references to a group of saved people. However, note that each time the readers are addressed as “brethren,” or some other term indicative of genuine faith (cf. vv. 1-6a, 12), the address is qualified. The identification as saved people established in verses 1-6a is qualified in verse 6b (where “if” is the third class conditional—“*ean*” {subjunctive mood—implying that the state of the condition is uncertain}; in other words, they may or may not actually be of God’s house). What the writer was saying is this: You are what I have called you (in verses 1-6a), assuming you hold fast (v. 6b). What is the opposite of holding fast? Verse 12 defines it as “falling away” (*apostasia*). Again, the identification as saved people established in verse 12 is qualified in verse 14, and once again “if” is the third class conditional, subjunctive mood. In other words, the author courteously addresses his audience according to their profession since he doesn’t know their hearts, but he does so with clear qualification. His form of address contains the cordial assumption that they are what they claim to be, though he clearly has concerns that some may eventually prove to be apostates, as have others that have already departed. There is a parallel to this type of address in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Three times in 2 Corinthians Paul referred to his readers as “brethren,” twice as “beloved” and in the first verse he addressed the letter to “saints,” but in 13:5 he warned that some might not be saved! Clearly his appellations were conditioned upon

true faith in Christ. Even though he addressed the readers as “saints” and “brethren,” Paul knew the likelihood that in any church there are some who, though they fully understand the gospel and appear to accept it, have yet to exercise genuine saving faith. The writer of Hebrews does the same; he writes to a local congregation warning them about the possibility of apostasy, even though he is convinced that most of them are genuinely saved (cf. 6:9). While the passage is addressed to those professing faith in Christ, it is a warning of the danger of failing to take possession of salvation through genuine saving faith.

The presence of these conditions is clear evidence that the author was concerned about the salvation of some in the local church. His assertion is that those who are truly saved are those who “hold fast the beginning...firm until the end,” (*i.e.*, they are not of those who “fall away”). This should not be construed to imply works salvation. The idea is not that one is saved because he or she holds fast, but that holding fast is an invariable characteristic of true faith. So much so that falling away indicates there was never saving faith. Failure to make this distinction is the basis for much confusion. This agrees with the message of 1 John 2:18-19. Therefore, we should understand the “rest” referred to in 3:15-4:13 as illustrating salvation through faith. Those who have placed their faith in Christ have entered that rest; all who have not entered are exhorted to do so before it’s too late. There is no indication here that a saved person could become lost. The message is simply this: It is those who hold fast to the end that have saving faith.



*Hebrews 6:4-12*

<sup>4</sup>For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup>and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, <sup>6</sup>and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. <sup>7</sup>For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; <sup>8</sup>but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. <sup>9</sup>But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. <sup>10</sup>For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. <sup>11</sup>And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, <sup>12</sup>so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

The three basic interpretations of the Hebrews apostasy passages were given above; however, we need to mention one additional interpretation given to 6:4-12, which we will refer to as “the hypothetical interpretation.” It asserts that this passage describes what would happen “if” a saved person could apostatize (which proponents view as impossible); thus, according to this view we have a hypothetical used for the sake of making a point. However,

this view fails to recognize that the warning concerns a very real problem, as indicated both in the book of Hebrews and elsewhere in the New Testament.

This passage was addressed to a believing audience; however, the key to its interpretation is distinguishing between those addressed (a mixed group that was presumptively Christian) and those being described. Those described have five qualities: 1) they've been enlightened; 2) they've tasted of the heavenly gift; 3) they've been made partakers of the Holy Spirit; 4) they've tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come; and, 5) they've fallen away. How do we know that apostasy (as we have defined it) is in view in this passage? First, because of the description: the individuals described are ones who have "fallen away." The Greek word *parapipto* is a strong term; it means, "to defect." [Although *parapipto* is used only here in the New Testament, we can get some feel for the term by observing the usage of *pipto* in Romans 11:11 where it is translated "fall" and refers to a complete and irrecoverable fall. *Parapipto* (*pipto* with a prepositional prefix) is an intensified form of *pipto*.] The nature and the magnitude of this defection can be seen in the last half of verse 6, "...since they are re-crucifying the Son of God for themselves and putting him to public ridicule" [the author's translation]. Note the following: We are told that they "re-crucify" the Son of God (*i.e.*, they display in their hearts and minds the same hostility, rejection, and contempt toward Christ as did those who crucified him. This rejection is both personal and public. They re-crucify him "to," or "for" themselves (middle voice) and put him to "open shame" (ridicule). This is clearly the same description given of apostasy elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pt. 2:1; 1 Jn. 2:18-19). While some imply that

carnality in the life of a believer is figuratively a re-crucifixion of Christ, such a thought is completely foreign to the book of Hebrews (cf. Heb. 10:10-14). Re-crucifixion of Christ in the heart and mind of an individual can only be taken as rejection; it is a falling away which, as we have seen from Hebrews chapter three, disqualifies one from the title of “brethren,” and being “partakers of a heavenly calling.”

The second reason we know this passage describes apostasy is due to the examples given. In verses 7 and 8 the two types of ground represent two types of people. There are those who respond with fruit and those who respond with thorns and thistles (cf. Jesus’ parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-23). The ground described in verse 8 is clearly representative of the person described in verse 6 who “falls away.” Notice the description of this ground: “... it is rejected and a curse is at hand [impending], of which the end is unto burning” [the author’s translation]. The word “curse” is *katara*, which elsewhere in the New Testament refers to eternal condemnation. Of course, it would be impossible for a saved person to suffer condemnation; otherwise, what was he, or she, saved from? Some find what they suppose to be a loophole in the word “nigh” (AV) or “close” (NASB). The argument offered is that this can describe saved people because it doesn’t say that they are cursed, only that they are “close” to being cursed. But, if as has been established, a saved person cannot be lost, how “close” can one get to something that is absolutely impossible? It is as absurd to think that a saved person could be close to condemnation as it is to think that such a one could be condemned. The word translated “close” is *eggus*. Its usage here has the sense of that which is impending (cf. 2 Pt. 2:3b). The idea is that the judgment of

the apostate has not been carried out yet, but that it will be when he faces the Lord whom he has persistently denied with full knowledge.

The third reason for believing that the person described in Hebrews 6:4-12 is an apostate is that apostasy is indicated by way of contrast with true faith. Verse 9 says: "But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way" (NASB). The word translated "accompany" is *echomena*, which in the middle voice, as here, means, "to seize" or "to possess for one's self." Notice that the writer distinguishes his readers in general from the individuals he has just described: They, the believers, had taken possession of salvation, clearly implying that those described earlier (vv. 4-8) had not. There are two responses to the gospel: one is to take possession of salvation through faith; the other is to turn from it, or simply ignore it—which is just a passive form of rejection. The people described in verses 4-8 are those who having received the gospel message, and perhaps at some superficial level having embraced it, ultimately turned away.

Again, there is no indication that the individuals described in this passage were once saved. Let's now take a closer look at each of the clauses used to describe these individuals. The first clause occurs in verse 4, and describes them as "...those who were once enlightened." The word "enlightened" is *photizo*, and its use here is figurative. The idea is of a person coming to understand the truth of the gospel. The question is: Does enlightenment come before or after saving faith? The answer is: "Both." One certainly comes to understand some things only after coming to faith in Christ, but they must understand the gospel before they

can make the decision to come. Thus, sufficient light must precede faith in order to make faith possible. The question with respect to the passage is whether the reference to enlightenment indicates saving faith, and since enlightenment must precede faith, it cannot be taken as evidence of faith. Thus, there is no reason to believe that the people described here once possessed saving faith. Note also that John 1:6-13 says that all men are enlightened at some time, though it is obvious that all men are not saved.

The second clause (v. 4) describes the subjects as ones who "...have tasted of the heavenly gift." The key to unraveling this statement lies with the word "tasted." Obviously this is a metaphorical use of the word since the heavenly gift is not something that could be literally tasted. The word *geuomai*, when used metaphorically, means "to perceive," as in, "a taste of reality." It's not necessary for a person to be saved to perceive the gift of God, because perceiving salvation through the illuminating and convicting work of the Holy Spirit is an integral part of the *epignosis* (the sure knowledge of the truth) that one must possess before they can exercise faith. This perception, far from being an evidence of faith, is rather a prerequisite to faith.

The third clause also occurs in verse 4 and describes the subjects as having been made "partakers of the Holy Spirit." There is general agreement that no one could be saved unless they first become a recipient (partaker) of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That work includes illumination, conviction, and calling. Actually, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit there would be no call to accept or reject. Because we normally regard "partaking" as active (*i.e.*, the

result of a choice), it's easy to misunderstand what the writer was saying. No such choice is indicated here, since "partake" is in the passive voice. In other words, these are not people who chose to partake, by an act of faith, but people who were only passive recipients of the illumination, conviction, and general calling of the Spirit. To illustrate, we could say that they were made partakers of the Spirit in the same way that a person is made a partaker of the judicial system when he or she receives a speeding ticket.

The fourth descriptive clause occurs in verse 5 and pictures the subjects as those who "have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." Again we have the word "tasted" (*geuomai*), and as before it is here used metaphorically. These individuals are said to have perceived the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, possibly a reference to the ministry of the Spirit in signs and wonders as manifested in the early churches. But this could be said of anyone within the church, whether saved or lost; so again, there is no implication that these people were saved.

The fifth descriptive clause occurs in verse 6 and pictures the subjects as having received all of the aforementioned benefits "and then have fallen away." The question is: What did they fall away from? The answer is that they fell away from what they had: the opportunity, by virtue of knowledge and conviction, to respond to the gospel. Here we encounter a difficult concept, difficult in the sense that it is not pleasant to consider, but there comes a time in the life of every person who persists in refusing the gospel when their refusal becomes permanent by their own choice. There is a time in the life of every person when

they are at the closest point they will ever be to coming to Christ—maximum light, conviction, persuasion, etc. If they refuse at that point, they will never come. Since no unsaved person knows when he or she is at that point, refusing to place one's faith in Christ at any opportunity could potentially render him, or her, beyond hope. This was a poignant warning to those within the church who had come out of the world and into the church, but who had failed to enter into salvation, hence the strong parallel to Israel's wandering in the wilderness described in Hebrews 3:7-4:11. Consequently, while this passage was written to a group of professing Christians, the writer was describing the problem of those in the group who might eventually apostatize because they weren't saved.

#### *Hebrews 10:26-31*

<sup>26</sup> For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, <sup>27</sup> but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*. <sup>29</sup> How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? <sup>30</sup> For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." <sup>31</sup> It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Verse 26 begins with the word “for.” When we examine verses 26-31, which describe the path to apostasy, what we find is that this section stands in contrast to verses 19-25, which describes true belief. Note also the parallel between 10:19-25 and 3:1-6, and between 10:19-25 and 3:12-14. It is clear that we have in these passages a recurring warning against apostasy.

In this passage we see six reasons why the people described in verses 26-31 are apostates (as defined here, *i.e.*, those who professed faith at one time, but later turned away because they never possessed genuine faith). The first reason is given in verse 26 where the text says, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” We know from our previous discussion of 2 Peter 2 that “the knowledge of the truth” refers to an understanding of the gospel (This identification is consistent throughout Peter’s writings, see 1 Peter 1:22.) Here we have a person who “sins willfully” (*i.e.*, makes a conscious choice of sin over Christ) after receiving the sure knowledge of the gospel (the *epignosis*). What we must understand is the nature of this state (the word “sinning” in the original is a present participle and indicates a continuing condition, or state). The word “willful” is *ekousios*, which means “voluntary.” In other words, this is the description of a person who has abandoned himself to an ongoing state, or condition of sin. In light of 1 John 3:6-10 this cannot describe a Christian who is merely struggling with sin; it is a description of a person who has willfully abandoned himself to sin and does not know Christ, regardless of what he might claim. (Virtually the whole of 1 John is devoted to this theme.) The second reason why this passage describes apostasy is found in verse 26b, where we read, “...there no longer



remains a sacrifice for sins." The word *apoleipetai*, translated "remains," means "to be left." We could say, "...there is left no sacrifice for sins." The reason is because this person has rejected the only sacrifice capable of taking his sin away. The third reason we know this passage is describing apostasy is that in verse 26 we're told he doesn't have a sacrifice (atonement) for sins, but rather the prospect of a terrifying future. Note this very important fact given in verse 27: these individuals are classified as "adversaries" of God; adversaries whom God will judge with a consuming fire. The NIV reads: "...but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." The fourth reason why this passage describes apostasy (as defined) is found in verse 29. There we see three parallel descriptions indicating that these individuals have rejected the gospel. The first statement says that they have "trampled under foot the Son of God." *Katapateo*, which is translated "trample," means "to spurn," when used figuratively as here. The idea is an outright rejection. In other words, this person has come to regard the Son of God as "worthless," like dirt beneath his feet. The second description says that he "regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified." The word "Unclean" (*koinos*) means "common," and thus, not holy. The idea is that this person regards the blood of Christ (his sacrifice) as profane. The third description says that they have "insulted the Spirit of grace," *i.e.*, the Holy Spirit. The English word "insult" doesn't carry the force of the Greek word "*enubrizo*." The idea is an arrogant, insolent, scornful, even blasphemous disregard of the Spirit's work in calling men to salvation. In these three descriptions we have three graphic pictures of the rejection of the gospel. The fifth reason why this passage describes apostasy is seen in

verses 30-31. *Ekdikesis*, translated “vengeance,” refers to retributive justice; the idea is punishment in the strictest sense. Because of their rejection of the gospel, these individuals will face the full force of God’s wrath. The sixth reason is in verse 39, where the author reflects back on what he has said in verses 19-38. Two words in the first part of this passage are critical to understanding who and what is being described here. “Shrink back” (*hupostolēs*) means, “to turn back”; the idea is equivalent to *apostasia* (“to fall away”); “destruction” (*apoleia*) means “perdition”; Perdition is lostness. Also, note the contrast presented in verse 39b. There can be no doubt that verse 39 identifies the people described in verses 26-31 as apostates *i.e.*, those who having once professed faith in Christ, have rejected him and his atonement.

Have we read anything in these descriptions that would lead us to believe these individuals were once saved? Arminians point out that there are a few reasons for thinking that this is the case. First, since the writer includes himself in the group he refers to by the pronoun “we” (v. 26), some assume that he must be referring to saved people, since the writer himself was obviously saved. However, the passage itself defines who is included within the scope of the pronoun; it is everyone who has “received the knowledge of the truth,” which encompasses both those who have responded positively with faith unto salvation, and those who have ultimately rejected faith unto perdition. There is no grammatical or contextual reason for restricting this pronoun (“we”) to refer only to saved people. The scope of a pronoun must be determined by the context. For instance, the pronoun “we” in verse 39 is clearly restricted to saved people because the context limits the reference to saved people, but in verse 26 the

reference clearly includes unsaved people. The second reason offered is that in verse 26 the subjects are said to have “received the knowledge of the truth.” As we have seen above, one must receive the knowledge of the truth in order to make a decision to come to Christ; accordingly such knowledge precedes salvation and in no way indicates that these individuals were once saved. In 2 Peter 2:20 Peter described people who received the knowledge of the Lord and Savior, but remain unsaved; we shouldn’t confuse “receiving the knowledge of the Lord” with “receiving the Lord.” Receiving the knowledge of the Lord doesn’t imply a decision on the part of the recipient; all that is indicated is that these individuals came to understand the truth of the gospel, not that they received it. The third reason is based on verse 29: They were said to have been “sanctified” by the blood of the covenant (*i.e.*, Christ’s blood), which many have taken as an indication that the writer must have been referring to people who were once saved. There is a tendency to associate the word “sanctify” (Gr. *hagiazō*) with salvation; however, the word “*hagiazō*” is used broadly in the New Testament, and its meaning must be determined by the context. In 1 Corinthians 7:14 this word is used in connection with the unsaved spouses of believers. It carries the idea of placing something into a privileged position, which might be a position of grace, or righteousness, or consecration, or opportunity. The question is: In what sense would it be appropriate to refer to a lost person as sanctified by the blood of Christ? The answer is that the death of Christ sanctifies every man and woman in that it puts each one into a position of opportunity to be saved (*i.e.*, it makes them “savable”). This clause has probably been the greatest sticking point in the interpretation of the passage, but it is important to recog-

nize that this is due to reading a very narrow concept of sanctification into the passage, rather than recognizing the broad scope of meaning for this word. Just as there is a special sense in which only true believers are sanctified, so there is another sense in which all men, especially those that are exposed to the gospel, are sanctified.

As we have seen, there is nothing in Hebrews 10:26-31 to indicate that the people in question were once saved; they are simply individuals who having come to understand the gospel, said “No” (or “Maybe” — which is the same thing), instead of “Yes.” The underlying message is this: Today is the day of salvation; don’t put it off. Whatever a person might think, they are without excuse and without remedy if, after hearing the gospel, they fail to respond in faith (cf. Heb. 3:7-19).

#### *Hebrews 12:14-29*

<sup>14</sup>Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup>See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; <sup>16</sup>that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal. <sup>17</sup>For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. <sup>18</sup>For you have not come to a *mountain* that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, <sup>19</sup>and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which *sound was such that* those who heard begged that no further

word be spoken to them.

In these sixteen verses there are five statements that indicate this passage is a warning against the type of apostasy we have described. The first is in verse 14b. What the author was saying is this: Pursue salvation; don't stop short only to be lost. There are two contrasting responses to the gospel: one is to take possession of salvation (cf. Heb. 6:9, the NASB rendering, "accompany" is *echomena*—middle voice, which means "to possess for one's self"); the other is to turn away. Here the author is clearly concerned that some people might not press forward and obtain, by faith, that sanctification (salvation) without which they are lost. The second statement is in verse 15a. This one would be difficult to interpret, if not for the context of verses 14-16; however, given that context, it is apparent that coming "short of the grace of God" means failure to enter into salvation. The third statement is in verse 16. Here "godless" (*bebēlos*) means "irreligious." The author is clearly describing apostasy. Even the illustration of Esau is of one who had something within reach, but turned from obtaining it. This should not be construed to imply that Esau was never saved; he is only mentioned here analogically to illustrate apostasy. The fourth statement occurs in verse 25a; it's an admonition about refusing him who warns from Heaven. *Paraitēsēsthe* (translated, "refuse") indicates a decisive rejection of God's warning of judgment. The fifth statement, found in verse 25b, describes those who turn away from God. Unlike some of the other passages we have seen in Hebrews, this one contains nothing that might easily be misconstrued to refer to people who were once saved. It is simply a sobering message: Don't be like Esau and trade your opportunity for a bowl of soup; if you do, you'll be sorry!

1 John 1:1-3:12

<sup>1:1</sup> What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— <sup>2</sup> and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— <sup>3</sup> what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. <sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; <sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

<sup>2:1</sup> My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*. <sup>3</sup> By this we know that we have

come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. <sup>4</sup>The one who says, “ I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; <sup>5</sup>but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: <sup>6</sup>the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. <sup>7</sup>Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. <sup>8</sup>On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining. <sup>9</sup>The one who says he is in the Light and *yet* hates his brother is in the darkness until now. <sup>10</sup>The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. <sup>11</sup>But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. <sup>12</sup>I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake. <sup>13</sup>I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. <sup>14</sup>I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God

abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.  
<sup>15</sup> Do not love the world nor the things in the world.  
If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever. <sup>18</sup> Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. <sup>19</sup> They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. <sup>20</sup> But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. <sup>21</sup> I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. <sup>22</sup> Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.  
<sup>23</sup> Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.  
<sup>24</sup> As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. The Promise Is Eternal Life.  
<sup>25</sup> This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life. <sup>26</sup> These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.  
<sup>27</sup> As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for



anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him. <sup>28</sup> Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. <sup>29</sup> If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.

<sup>3:1</sup> See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. <sup>2</sup> Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. <sup>3</sup> And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. <sup>4</sup> Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; <sup>8</sup> the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the

one who does not love his brother. <sup>11</sup> For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; <sup>12</sup> not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

Virtually the entire book of 1 John comprises an extended contrast of vain profession versus true faith, and demonstrates that disingenuous faith sometimes manifests its true nature in open defection, which is what personal apostasy is all about. For the sake of brevity we will focus our attention primarily on the first three chapters of the book. In these chapters John discussed the problem of those within the local church who claimed to know God, but whose lives evidenced a different reality. The opening verses indicate that this church had become infected with an incipient form of Gnosticism. We know that regardless of whether these individuals were connected with Gnostic beliefs or not, they are clearly identified as those who deny that God came in the flesh (cf. 4:2); they professed to be in right relation to God but were characterized by corrupt living (1:5; 3:4-10), denial of sin (1:8-10), disobedience to the commands of God (2:3-4), hatred, or at least a lack of love toward the brethren (2:9-11; 3:11-18; 4:20), love of the world (2:15-17), in some cases open defection (2:18-19), denial that Jesus was the Messiah (2:22-23; 3:14-15), and denial of the personal union of the divine and human natures of Christ (4:1-6). John makes the point that such individuals do not have fellowship (a personal relationship) with God. He does this by way of contrast, stating that it is those who "walk in the light" who have fellowship with God, not those who merely profess.

It is a tragedy that the concept of fellowship with God has been so misconstrued. Perhaps the most prevalent view of fellowship is that Christians who obey God and “walk in the light” are in fellowship with God, and those Christians who sin and do not confess their sins are “out of fellowship”; hence, the misconception that confession restores “broken fellowship” with God. Such a view is completely at odds with the message of 1 John. John clearly contrasts two kinds of people: the children of God (true believers, whose life is characterized by walking in light), and children of the Devil (whose lives are characterized by walking in darkness and denying the faith), cf. 3:10. True believers have fellowship (a relationship) with God; everyone else is in darkness. This does not mean that believers don’t sin, everyone sins. But when they sin, saved people confess their sin and move forward. In fact, verse 7 clearly demonstrates that sin does not interrupt a believer’s fellowship with God. John said: “...but if we walk in the light [*peripatomen*—present continual action] as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship [*koinonian*—present continual action] with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin [*kathapizei*—present continual action]” (NASB). Notice that these three actions occur simultaneously: walking in the light, having fellowship, and being cleansed from all sin. John doesn’t say that if one walks in the light but falls into sin and loses his or her fellowship, that when they confess their sin fellowship is restored; he says this: If one is walking in the light, they are, at the very same time, experiencing fellowship with God and being cleansed from all sin. It should be apparent that John was not teaching that sin breaks fellowship, or that confession restores it. This is not to minimize the importance of confession. The fact is that Christians can

no more lose their fellowship with God than they can lose their salvation. While this discussion may seem to be unrelated to the topic at hand, it is important to understand the subject with which John was dealing. According to John, there are two basic categories of people associated with the local church: those who claim to be in right relation to God, and are, and those who claim to be in right relation to God, and aren't. Those who claim to be in right relation to God, but who do not know him, are the same people described in the previous passages who ultimately, if they persist in their unbelief, fall beyond hope (cf. 2:18-19). We will proceed in the same manner as with the other passages, that is, to demonstrate that the individuals described are set in contrast to those who are saved.

In 1:5-2:2 John's argument proceeds from the nature of God. God is light, without the slightest mixture of darkness (v. 5), so God's children, who are in him, are children of light and walk in the light (vv. 6-7). That does not mean they are completely without sin, for as verse 7 says, their lives are characterized by three activities, all occurring continuously: they walk in the light, they have fellowship with God and with their brethren, and as they walk in the light they are being continually cleansed of sin. Stated succinctly, what John said is this: If a person knows God, his life may not be perfect, but one thing is certain, it will reflect that he is a child of light rather than a child of darkness. In essence, John said that it is possible to see the evidence of true faith from the outside. This is an important truth that has been largely obscured in modern Christianity as we have lost our grip on the doctrine of conversion. Why did John make such a statement? Because the local church was experiencing the destructive effects of those within that claimed to be right with God who were not what they

professed to be. The only practical means of identifying true faith in another is conversion, *i.e.*, the outward change that manifests inner transformation, a change that can only be observed over time (cf. Mt. 13:19-23, esp. vv.20-21). We must be careful in view of Christ's teaching in Matthew 13 that some seeds sprout quickly, but die. In that parable only those plants that eventually yielded fruit represent saved people. We must not be misled by those who readily respond to the gospel and appear to grow for a while; they may yet prove to be unfruitful. Only time will tell if their faith is genuine. We are not thus judging the new believer, but suspending judgment until the evidence is in.

Apparently the particular form of unbelief that John was confronting had this characteristic: it tended to deny personal responsibility for sin. This makes a strong case that it might have been an early form of Gnosticism, since that was a feature known to have been associated with Gnostic beliefs. John's retort is clear and direct: If anyone says he has no sin, he is deceiving himself (v. 8), and calling God a liar, since God has declared all men to be sinners (Ps. 53:1-3). Confession of sin, that is, coming to grips with what we are, is one of the core characteristics of true faith, it's called "repentance," and it's one of the reasons some people refuse to come to salvation, because they cannot bring themselves to admit what they are. Repentance isn't just something one does in order to obtain salvation, it's an integral part of faith; it's a turning from sin in order to turn to God, and it doesn't cease once a person is saved. Repentance continues to be a part of faith as one progresses throughout the Christian life. The person who doesn't manifest repentance, or as John says, "confession," only evidences that true faith isn't present.

In 1 John 2:3-11 John emphasized that the reality of true conversion, or as he put it, “knowing God,” will manifest itself not only in the inner life of the believer, but in the outer life as well. James also dealt with this subject (Jam. 2:14-26), but John took it a step further; he not only asserted that the true knowledge of God is evidenced by obedience (vv. 3,5,6) and love of the brethren (vv. 7-11), but he stated that where there is a lack of these, the claim to know God is invalidated. Such people live in the darkness, not in the light, and thus do not know God. This is tough language that the church needs to hear.

In 2:12-18 notice how John continues his contrast of true faith and false profession. In verses 12-14 he reasserts the position of the truly converted: Their sins are forgiven (v. 12), they know God (vv. 13-14), they have overcome the Evil One (“overcome” is *nenikēkate*—perfect active, *i.e.*, they now stand as victors based on the triumph of their faith) cf. vv. 13-14, they are strong spiritually (v. 14), and the word of God continually abides in them (v. 14). The love of the world is inconsistent with Christian faith. (John wasn’t referring to the people of the world, but to worldliness, *i.e.*, the embracing of the world’s ways and values.) Anyone who loves the world does not love the Father (v. 15), because the character of the world, that is, fleshly lust, material lust, and pride, do not come from the Father; they are the product of the darkness that is in the world. The world is destined to perish, but not the one who does the will of the Father, that is, the one who truly knows God.

In 2:19-27, having laid the foundational truth that there are two kinds of people within the visible church (those who truly know God, and those who merely profess to know him), John next embarked on his explanation of the

apostasy of individuals within the local congregation. He reminds the believers that they are living in the last hour (*i.e.*, “the last time” — the *eschaton*, which from the Old Testament perspective began with the advent of Christ). They had been taught that in the *eschaton* false Christs (antichrists) would come. Jesus is the source of this information. It originates from his Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:24). Whether these believers had access to any of the gospel accounts is unknown, but they certainly had access to apostolic teaching, which would have included this important information. In verse 19, which is undoubtedly one of the most important explanatory passages in the New Testament, John made the profound assertion that those who have departed have done so because they were never “of us” (*i.e.*, of the children who dwell in light, that is, those who know God). In light of the reiteration in the second half of the verse, it is quite impossible to misunderstand his meaning. He says that we know they were not of us because if (*ei gar*, “for if” — giving the reason) they had been of us, they would have remained with us, *i.e.*, they would not have apostatized. John stated that the departure of these individuals happened for a purpose, “in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us”; the sense is that not everyone who professes to be right with God is truly saved. This verse establishes two critical points with respect to the theme of the book and the New Testament doctrine of salvation: 1) the theme of this book is the contrast of true faith with mere profession; and, 2) it establishes the doctrine of the permanence of salvation, since it clearly says that anyone who departs from the faith they once professed was never genuinely saved. (See the previous discussion in chapter one on the permanence of salvation.)

In verse 22 John reiterated that the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah, God's Son in the flesh) speaks in the spirit of antichrist, which denies both Father and Son (v. 22). The denial of Christ is also a denial of the Father (v. 23), which answers the question some have posed as to whether it might be possible that some who rejected Christ as Messiah could have been sincere worshippers of the Father. In light of John's statement there can be no doubt that those who rejected Jesus, as the Christ, could not have been sincere worshippers of God.

In 2:28-3:12 John continues his contrast with the admonition to abide in Christ, but adds an additional motivation: that we might have confidence and not shrink away from him, as will those who dwell in darkness, at his coming (v. 28). Again, he reinforces his previous statements to the effect that it is those who practice righteousness who are born of God (the word "practice" is "*poion*," a present active participle, meaning to practice as an ongoing thing). The one who practices sin (again, "*poion*") also practices lawlessness, because sin is lawlessness. The ones who walk in darkness blatantly disobey God's explicit commands (v. 4). Christ didn't come to save men so that they would be free to sin, but so they could be free from sin (v. 5). He repeated what he had said before: "No one who abides in Him sins." This is not a reference to individual sins, as we have noted, everyone sins, but to the giving of one's self to live in sin. He admonished the brethren not to be deceived; true belief manifests itself in righteousness (v. 7)—imperfectly, of course, in this life. Where righteousness is absent, it is to be assumed that saving faith is also absent (v. 8). Notice the strong dichotomy. John leaves no room for misunderstanding. He wasn't merely contrasting spiritual believers with carnal believers as some



interpreters suggest, he was contrasting the saved with the lost, belief with unbelief. Not only does the one who is born of God not practice sin (as a lifestyle), he cannot, because God's seed, the indwelling Holy Spirit, abides in him. As if he had not stated this truth robustly enough already, John next connected all the dots so that no one would have any reason to misunderstand. He vigorously maintained that it is possible to tell who are children of God and who are children of the Devil by their lifestyles (v. 10). In an age of "private religion" and personal tolerance, this is not a popular text; and if strictly applied, which it should be, we would have to confess that there are probably far fewer saved people than the number professing faith would suggest.

There are other passages in 1 John where this same contrast between the truly saved and the merely professing can be seen (3:14-15; 4:1-6, 7-10, 11-21; 5:1-12); However, the point is sufficiently made that there are two kinds of people within the visible church—those who claim to know God, and do, and those who claim to know God and don't. It is those in this last group that are in danger of apostatizing.

### **The path to apostasy**

In understanding the path to apostasy it is helpful to get a clear picture of what is involved in a person coming to faith in Christ. Probably the simplest statement is that faith is submission to the gospel. Notice we didn't say, "believing the truth of the gospel"; there are many who believe the truth of the gospel, but who have never made the deliberate, conscious choice to submit themselves to the Christ of the gospel. This is, of course, the whole reason that some people eventually become apostates. They have

come only part way; they acknowledge the truth, but fail to appropriate it.

We know from several passages discussed already that an apostate has at one time known and professed to believe the truth. (2 Peter 2:20 and Hebrews 10:26 both use the term *epignosis*, referring to a sure knowledge or understanding.) Once a person comes to have the *epignosis* there are two things that could occur to lead him, or her, to apostasy. The most obvious fault would be an immediate and final refusal. The other, and perhaps not so obvious failure, is that in the absence of a choice to accept Christ, the person simply puts off yielding himself, or herself, to Christ. In reality this is just a more passive form of rejection.

Paul said in 1 Timothy 4:1-3 that one avenue of apostasy is that people are led astray into demonic doctrine. It is instructive to note that these doctrines are most often communicated through the vehicle of religion. If this seems surprising, we should note what Christ said about the religious system of his day (Mt. 23:1-36, cf. 7:21-23). Undoubtedly many fall into apostasy after coming to understand the gospel because they simply delay in responding and are diverted into false religion under the guise of religious (but unbiblical) truth. Delay can be deadly. In Hebrews 3:13 the writer warned against failing to accept the offer of salvation "lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." What is meant by "the deceitfulness of sin"? Simply that sin promises fulfillment, but it delivers death. Sin always involves believing a lie (Heb. 10:26-27). Once a person has come to the sure knowledge of the truth, the choice to remain in a state of sin is inherently a rejection of Christ (cf. v. 29), which in some cases results in a final decision from which a

person will never turn. The most dangerous position that any person could be in is having come to a knowledge of the gospel, to delay responding, for each moment that “Yes” is withheld is another “No!”

## Conclusions

The purpose in exploring the characteristics of apostasy is not judgmental, but practical and preventative. If we don't know what apostasy is and how it's manifested, we will be ill prepared to warn others, or understand it when it happens. What does apostasy look like? A collage of the biblical facts is that an apostate no longer holds to the truth of the gospel (1 Timothy 4:1 and Hebrews 6:6—they fall away from the faith; Hebrews 3:6,14—they do not hold fast; Hebrews 10:39—they shrink back to destruction; Hebrews 12:14—they do not pursue sanctification {the sanctification acquired by faith that is required for acceptance before God}; Hebrews 12:25—they turn away from God {by turning away from the truth}; 2 Peter 2:15—they forsake {relinquish} the right way). Apostates are often individuals who have permitted themselves to be deceived by false religion (2 Tim. 4:1-3). The heart of an apostate is evil and unbelieving (Heb. 3:12).

A person cannot reject Christ and love God (Jn. 5:23, cf. vv. 37-38). An apostate's motivation is clearly indicated in 2 Peter 2:3 and Jude 12; they are people who have been hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13; 10:26; 2 Pt. 2:9-15). An apostate's attitude toward Christ is one of absolute rejection (Heb. 6:6; 10:29; 12:25); due to their own choice, they are hopelessly lost individuals (Heb. 6:6). Their hopeless condition is not due to God's rejection of them, but their rejection of him.

## Final Thoughts

Perhaps you noticed the way the title of this book is worded: “When People Walk Away From the Faith.” It doesn’t say: “When People Walk Away From THEIR Faith.” The reason is that people who have saving faith can’t just walk away. (1 Jn. 2:18-19) They can do a lot of things. They can sin, they can fail to grow in their faith as they ought, and they can even be selfishly rebellious for a time, or be in a state of spiritual depression and malaise, but they can’t relinquish their faith; that much is clear from the passages we have studied. There are, of course, people who claim to believe, and indeed do seem to believe, as far as can be determined from the outside, who at some latter time do walk away from their profession of faith. From our perspective, not being able to see into a person’s innermost being, we may not be able to say who is, and who is not an apostate. But that’s not the point; it’s not our place to make such judgments. What is important is to know that the possibility of personal apostasy is real, and that every individual in every church needs to hear the warning against failing to take possession of faith, for undoubtedly there is someone in almost every church who though understanding the gospel, has yet to appropriate salvation by faith. It isn’t enough to know, or even to agree with the truth of the gospel. Faith involves a personal commitment, a decision, a choice of Christ over everything else. The living out of that commitment may, indeed will prove to be difficult, but the decision to make such a commitment is fundamental to the nature of saving faith. Faith isn’t just an intellectual process; it’s an act of the will, by the enablement of God, based upon the truth of the gospel. One might have a perfect understanding of the gospel

truth, and even admit to that truth and yet not be saved. Sadly, this phenomenon explains why many simply walk away from the faith, because they never possessed saving faith. Unfortunately many of these warnings against apostasy have been misconstrued as warnings concerning the possible loss of salvation. We have attempted to show from each of the major passages on apostasy that such is not the case. The reader who still has questions about the eternal security of the saved may need further study in regard to man's condition of total depravity and the biblical teaching concerning salvation. For the reader who would like more information in these areas, the author's work, *Major Bible Doctrines* (Biblical Reader Communications, 2010) may be a useful resource.