

## WHAT IS APOSTASY?

Among Christians today, we may still hear some mention made of apostasy even though the sweeping shift into Ecumenical thinking has significantly reduced the number of those who might be concerned about it. Nevertheless, among those who are more conservative in their worldview, there is still some consideration given to apostasy within their thinking. However, if you investigate the subject more carefully, it soon becomes evident that even within this group there is significant confusion on this subject; somewhat surprisingly, this is even the case among those who are often considered to be the shining lights within the conservative arm of Evangelicalism.

As we begin to examine apostasy, it is important that we define the term correctly – this seems to be somewhat difficult for many; much confusion reigns on many fronts because of incorrect or misapplied definitions. One modern dictionary defines apostasy as “a total desertion of or departure from one’s religion”;<sup>1</sup> another says that it is a “renunciation of a religious faith” or an “abandonment of a previous loyalty.”<sup>2</sup> An older dictionary states that it is “a total desertion, or departure from one’s faith or religion.”<sup>3</sup> A theological dictionary says: “Apostasy is the falling away from the Christian faith. It is a revolt against the truth of God’s word by a believer.”<sup>4</sup> There may be some additional small variations in the definition of the term, but there seems to be a general agreement across the board that it would include such things as: *departure*, *renunciation*, *abandonment*, *desertion* and *falling away*. It is also interesting to note that, for the most part, even the secular definitions have focused on a religious application.

Now we must look into the Scriptures to see what God has said about apostasy.

When Adam sinned, we recognize that that resulted in all of his descendants being born in sin – we are sinners because we are children of Adam; there was an original sin by which we have all been infected.<sup>5</sup> As Paul expounded on the essential centrality of the Lord’s resurrection to our faith, he said: “For as in Adam all die [are dying (present tense)], even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).<sup>6</sup> Death, which is the just consequence for sin (Romans 6:23), is attached to us from the moment that we are born; it is said that the average adult sheds approximately eight pounds of dead skin cells every year<sup>7</sup> – that is a witness to the fact that physical death is an inherent part of life for all of us. Beyond that, we are also subject to spiritual death (separation from God); we are born in innocence (Matthew 19:14), but very quickly comes the time when we know that we are doing what is wrong (sin). Nevertheless, we must also recognize that God did not abandon Adam and Eve in their sinful condition; He immediately implemented the plan of redemption that He had prepared before creation; John refers to Jesus as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). Even though God did not leave Adam

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/apostasy>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apostasy>

<sup>3</sup> Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), “apostasy.”

<sup>4</sup> <http://carm.org/dictionary-apostasy>

<sup>5</sup> To my surprise, not everyone agrees on the subject of original sin; see my study of this subject: <https://www.thenarrowtruth.com/born-sinless.html>

<sup>6</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>7</sup> <http://health.howstuffworks.com/skin-care/information/anatomy/shed-skin-cells.htm>

and Eve and all of their descendants without hope, the redemption that He has made available is not automatically applied to everyone who is born. The promise to deal with sin with finality was made by the Lord to Satan in the Garden of Eden: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it [*He*; this is a masculine pronoun in the Hebrew] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15).<sup>8</sup> It was necessary for the individual to be persuaded (to believe) that God’s promise of redemption was true; his believing would then be expressed by sacrificing a perfect, clean animal in order to receive a temporary cleansing from sin – the sacrifice was an expression of his faith in the Lord. Very quickly we see Abel’s acceptable expression of his faith in the Lord, while Cain chose an offering of fruit for the Lord – the labor of his own hands that was rejected by God (Genesis 4:4-5). What is also evident through Cain’s example, is that we do not get to choose how we approach the holy God; Cain learned that the labor of his hands is not acceptable to God to bring cleansing from sin – the shedding of blood was necessary. Faith in the promise of the Lord was key to restoring a relationship with Him; this was as true for Adam, Abel and Abraham as it is for you and me – salvation has always come by faith in the Lord! “Abraham believed God [his believing was evident through his obedience], and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Romans 4:3; James 2:17).

Among the descendants of Adam, God has always had His chosen few – those who exercised faith in that first promise of a Savior that He made in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15). God found Noah who was prepared to place his faith in what he was told by Jehovah and, through him, eight people were saved from the flood that killed all of the rest of humanity. Many years later, Elijah was sure that he was the only one left in Israel who was still faithful to Jehovah, but God assured him that there remained 7,000 who had not bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19:18) – not a large number, but much greater than Elijah had imagined. Isaiah proclaimed: “For though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, *yet* a remnant of them shall return ...” (Isaiah 10:22). Through the ages when the Roman Catholic Church reigned with force and imposed their corrupt form of Christianity upon everyone under their control, there still remained a *remnant* who were faithful to the Gospel of God. Tucked away in the deep valleys of the Italian Alps were small groups of people, like the Waldenses, who kept the Word of God free from the taint of Rome.

After briefly affirming that God has a plan of salvation that He prepared before creation was started, let’s turn our focus onto the individual application of the subject at hand – apostasy. What does it mean for someone to apostatize? Who can become an apostate? The reality is that even in the midst of an apostate nation (a nation that does not acknowledge God in any way), a remnant of the Lord’s faithful may still remain. It must be our primary concern that we strive to remain faithful to the Lord among a people who are given to paganism – after all, we are individually accountable to God for what we do in this life (Hebrews 9:27).

Paul wrote to Timothy: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing [deceitful] spirits, and doctrines of devils” (1 Timothy 4:1).<sup>9</sup> The phrase *depart from* comes from the Greek word *aphistemi* (*af-is’-tay-mee*),

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<sup>8</sup> Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew Lexicon, *BibleWorks* 8.

<sup>9</sup> Gingrich Lexicon, *BibleWorks* 8.

and it means to withdraw one's self from, to fall away,<sup>10</sup> to apostatize,<sup>11</sup> to go away, or withdraw.<sup>12</sup> The warning given is that, due to deceiving spirits and the teachings of devils, there will be some who will fall away from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. From this it would seem to be crystal-clear that apostasy will be a reality in our day (most will agree that we are living in the *latter times*). What often becomes more difficult is the determination of what constitutes deception and how to identify a teaching that comes from the devil.

Paul dealt with this specific matter in his letter to the Romans: "Now I beseech [implore] you, brethren, mark [watch out for] them which cause divisions [dissensions, resulting in a separation from the Lord and His Word] and offences [temptations to sin] contrary to [*para* – alongside of] the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid [turn away from] them. For they that are such serve not [an absolute negative] our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly [desires]; and by good words [smooth/plausible speech; eloquence] and fair speeches [flattery] deceive [seduce completely] the hearts of the simple [unsuspecting]" (Romans 16:17-18).<sup>13</sup> This is packed with some critical information on how we are to determine if what we are hearing or reading would qualify as deception or a teaching from the devil. We are to watch out for those who teach that which is not entirely Biblical because that is an indication that the teaching is deceptive; if it is not completely Biblical then it contains error that we are to *avoid*. I'm sure that we've all heard those who teach with great eloquence but we can sense that there is something a bit off, even if we can't pinpoint it. The requirement to being alert to these teachers is that we must be thoroughly acquainted with the Word of God; since remaining alert is a life-long task, we must be diligently working to grow our understanding of God's Word even as we measure everything that we hear against His truth. Don't accept what you hear simply because you don't have the knowledge of the Bible that would make your evaluation easy; take what you hear and hold it against the light of Scripture – take the opportunity to study God's Word and permit His Spirit to open your understanding.

Let's look at these words from the Spirit of God to the Romans in light of a very pointed comment made in Galatians 1:8-9: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." Paul not only affirms that the Message that he brought to the Galatians was the truth of God, but also asserts that anyone who brings a message that does not agree with it is to be *accursed*! To the Romans, Paul said that they were to be alert for those who would teach that which is *alongside of* the Word of God; perhaps their doctrine might be very close to the truth but not quite right-on – the command given is to turn away from (*avoid*) them! In such a case where their teaching does not pass the examination against the Word of God, we must declare it to be a teaching that comes from the devil; it might sound very good and, perhaps, even be presented by someone in whom we have had confidence, nevertheless, it is deceptive and will be used by Satan to plant a seed of doubt or cast a stumbling block in our way. Jesus said, "He that is not with me

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<sup>10</sup> Gingrich Lexicon.

<sup>11</sup> Vine's "depart."

<sup>12</sup> Friberg Lexicon.

<sup>13</sup> Strong's Online; Friberg Lexicon; Gingrich Lexicon.

is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matthew 12:30); there is no grey area where we are permitted to extend acceptance to those who teach that which is not in keeping with the Word of God. Truth that has been mixed with error is no longer truth, but has become a deceptive and much more deadly potion – really much more dangerous than pure falsehood.

If we bring this into the realm of apostasy, we can then begin to understand that it does not take a wholesale departure from the Scriptures to move someone into serious error (sin). God’s Message of redemption is narrow – Jesus is the one and ONLY way to heaven (John 14:6), and that Narrow Way is not easily found (Matthew 7:13-14). The challenge that we will all face is that of the Ecumenical mind; do not be deceived, the Ecumenist is either pagan (he has never known the Lord’s salvation) or he is apostate (he has fallen away from faith in the Lord). If the Ecumenist was truly born again, then he is dabbling in spiritual fornication and, unless he repents very quickly, he is willingly joining those who violate God’s Word. Jesus’ word to the elder (*angel*) of Sardis was that even though his reputation was that he was spiritually alive, he was dead and unless he repented very quickly, he would be numbered among those whose names are blotted out of the Book of Life (Revelation 3:1-5). There can be serious consequences to not being alert to the dangers of error.

Jesus warned: “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, **if it were possible** [*ei dunaton*, εἰ δυνατόν<sup>14</sup>], they shall deceive [to lead away from the truth] the very elect” (Matthew 24:24).<sup>15</sup> The italics in this verse (*it were*) have been supplied by the translators – they are not in the Greek text; it is the supplied words that make it sound like it’s not possible for the *elect* to be deceived. We are led to believe that this tells us that the *elect*, those who are *in Christ* (Ephesians 1:4), cannot be deceived so as to fall away from Him – i.e., it is not possible. Although this common belief fits very well with the false, Evangelical doctrine of eternal security and the Reformed teaching on the perseverance of the saints (elect), it does not fit as well with the text of Scripture. Consider one example, among several, where this exact Greek phrase is also used: “For Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus ... for he hasted, **if it were possible** [*ei dunaton*, εἰ δυνατόν<sup>16</sup> (even though the Greek is the same as above, the translators did not indicate that they had supplied words)] for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16). It is obvious from this that Paul intended to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost and that this would be very possible if he hurried. Therefore, returning to Matthew 24:24, we must accept that, in fact, **it is possible** for the elect to be deceived if the false teachers are sufficiently convincing; this is another of several warnings against being deceived that Jesus gave to His disciples within this one discourse. We must not use a text that might be somewhat difficult to interpret to overturn many passages of Scripture that leave no doubt as to what they mean. We must be discerning, lest we be deceived!

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<sup>14</sup> Stephanus 1550 NT.

<sup>15</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanus 1550 NT.

“Let no man deceive you [*no one should completely deceive you*] by any means: for *that day shall not come*, except there come a falling away first ...” (2 Thessalonians 2:3).<sup>17</sup> This was written to the *ekklesia* at Thessalonica – to those who are described as being “in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 1:1). The words *falling away* come from the Greek *apostasia*, which means a defection, apostasy or rebellion.<sup>18</sup> The statement that apostasy is coming is preceded by the exhortation: *no one should completely deceive you in any way*.<sup>19</sup> *Deceive* (*exapatao*) is an intensive word in the Greek and means to beguile completely or deceive wholly;<sup>20</sup> it is also in the subjunctive mood, which means that this deception may or may not occur, depending on the choices that are made.<sup>21</sup> Once again, the only possible understanding that can be extracted from this is that it is possible for those who are numbered among the faithful in Jesus Christ to be deceived so completely that they become apostate.

If we are willing to accept the Biblically-supported fact that those who are truly born-again can apostatize, then suddenly many warnings within the Word of God take on a whole new significance and meaning. “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). This is directed to *brethren* and speaks of unfaithfulness (*unbelief*) being the means of forsaking the Lord. We are forewarned to continually exercise discernment lest our heart (the seat of our will), which is deceitful above all and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9), should desert (*aphistemi*), or withdraw from God.<sup>22</sup> Isaiah declared: “And the destruction of the transgressors [rebellious ones] and of the sinners *shall be* together, and they that forsake [to abandon or apostatize from] the LORD shall be consumed [destroyed]” (Isaiah 1:28).<sup>23</sup> There are numerous warnings to remain faithful throughout all of Scripture, so obviously, this is not new, even if we heard of it through our church experience.

A favored word within the Evangelical’s vocabulary is *backslide* (or *backslider*, *backsliding*, etc.), a term that means “to relapse into bad habits, sinful behavior, or undesirable activities.”<sup>24</sup> It is used with little or no embarrassment, and is commonly considered to be a normal pattern for the modern Christian; it is held to be something from which recovery is possible at any time, no matter how long the condition has prevailed. We do not find the English word, *backslide*, in our New Testament Scriptures, but we do find it used several times in the Old Testament prophetic books. For example: “Thine own wickedness shall correct [chastise] thee, and thy **backslidings** shall reprove [judge] thee: know therefore and see that *it is* an evil *thing* and bitter, that thou hast forsaken [abandoned] the LORD thy God, and that my fear [awe or dread] *is* not in thee, saith the Lord GOD of hosts” (Jeremiah 2:19).<sup>25</sup> Jehovah is addressing the nation of Israel as an individual (hence the singular pronouns) even though Israel is now a great many people. Israel, generally speaking, had forsaken the Lord, yet as Elijah learned, the individuals within Israel would include:

<sup>17</sup> Friberg Lexicon; Stephanus 1550 NT.

<sup>18</sup> Strong’s Online; Friberg Lexicon.

<sup>19</sup> Stephanus 1550 NT.

<sup>20</sup> Strong’s Online; Vine’s “deceive.”

<sup>21</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/backslide?s=t>

<sup>25</sup> Strong’s Online.

1) the apostate (those who have fallen from faith), 2) the pagan (those who have never believed), and 3) those who continued to exercise faith in God (the faithful). Israel had been redeemed out of Egypt by the Lord God, yet, as a nation, they had turned away from following Him – hence the Hebrew word translated as *backslidings* is applied to Israel. In the same way, Canada and the USA have often been referred to as “Christian” nations even though they are almost completely pagan; nevertheless, within these nations there will be those of the three possible categories: the fallen, the pagan, and the faithful.

The meaning of the Hebrew word translated as *backsliding* (*m<sup>e</sup>shuwbah*) is “turning away, turning back, apostasy.”<sup>26</sup> The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint) uses the word *apostasia* for what our English translation shows as *backslidings* in Jeremiah 2:19. What is immediately evident is that this is the same Greek word translated as *falling away* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, and we have already noted that this speaks of apostasy. Drawing these together, there can be no doubt as to the significance of this word; it is referring to more than a simple lapse in spiritual judgment or a stumble along the pathway of life. This is not accidental but deliberate; remember, *apostasy* is “the **renunciation** of a religious belief”;<sup>27</sup> you cannot accidentally renounce something – it must be an act of the will. Our English word *backsliding* does not come close to what Jeremiah is saying; it makes it sound like there has been a general movement toward God but, through some seemingly uncontrollable circumstances, there is suddenly a slide backward – even while you may still be trying to move toward God, you are sliding away from Him. That is how the Evangelical mind would like to think of it – no matter how long it is that you have been unfaithful to the Lord, you are only sliding backward. Jehovah, through Jeremiah, says, “NO!” Your *apostasy* will judge you! You are no longer endeavoring to walk in faithfulness to God; you are not even facing God anymore – you have turned around and are walking (not sliding) in the opposite direction – you have *forsaken* Jehovah; you are *apostate*!

If we bear in mind that the people of Israel knew what the Lord required of them, then we would have to assume that there were probably very few ignorant pagans in Israel, a few faithful, but a host of apostate and deliberate pagans – those who had known the way, or known about the way, but refused to walk in it. Within the Law of Moses, the Lord had made provision for Israel to deal with those who turned from Him, but it is very evident that this was not their practice:

And if any soul sin through **ignorance**, then he shall bring a she goat of the first year for a sin offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for the soul that sinneth ignorantly, when he sinneth by ignorance before the LORD, to make an atonement for him; and it shall be forgiven him. ... But the soul that doeth *ought* **presumptuously** [with a high hand], *whether he be* born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth [blasphemes] the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off [the death penalty<sup>28</sup>] from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the LORD, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity *shall be* upon him (Numbers 15:27-31).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>27</sup> Encarta Dictionary, “apostasy.”

<sup>28</sup> BDB.

<sup>29</sup> Strong’s Online.

This passage makes it very clear that for the faltering faithful, God had made provision for cleansing and a restored relationship, and it is equally evident that for the sin that was carried out in arrogance (deliberately), there was no prescribed sacrifice. “And the man that will do **presumptuously** [in arrogance], and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even **that man shall die**: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel” (Deuteronomy 17:12).<sup>30</sup> The Lord gave very clear instructions regarding anyone who sinned deliberately – instructions that were meant to preserve the purity of His chosen people, yet it is also evident from Israel’s history that there was no will to obey God’s commandment in this regard. Even though Israel failed to practice this instruction from the Lord in order to keep their walk holy before Him, it must not be thought that God then simply waived His requirement in this regard. To those who sinned willfully (with a high hand), God says: “... his iniquity *shall be* upon him” (Numbers 15:31); in other words, he will bear his sin – it will not be forgiven him (cp. Romans 6:23); therefore, even if Israel failed to apply the death penalty in order to purge the sin from their midst, God would apply the eternal death penalty! “When the righteous turneth [to apostatize] from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, he shall even die thereby” (Ezekiel 33:18).<sup>31</sup> Truly, to become apostate (turning from *righteousness* to *iniquity*) is a serious matter that is irrevocable and bears eternal consequences.

Lest we think that this is an Old Testament teaching and one that is no longer applicable, consider the words that Peter penned by the Spirit of God: “For if after they have escaped the pollutions [defilement] of the world through the knowledge [a full or precise and correct knowledge] of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known [to be thoroughly acquainted with] the way of righteousness, than, after they have known *it*, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (2 Peter 2:20-21).<sup>32</sup> This speaks of those who have been influenced by false teachers, against whom Peter is raising the alarm in this passage. “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake *as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost. But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in [will secretly introduce] damnable [destructive] heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 1:21-2:1).<sup>33</sup> Just as there were false prophets among the people of Israel, so there will be false teachers among the people of God today. These *false teachers* have “forsaken the right way” (2 Peter 2:15) and “speak great swelling words of vanity” so as to entice those who have departed from sin (those who have been saved by the Lord), and who have “clean [truly] escaped from them who live in error” (2 Peter 2:18).<sup>34</sup> “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ [the *false teachers*], but their own belly [desires or appetites]; and by good words [eloquence] and fair speeches [flattery] deceive [completely deceive] the hearts

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<sup>30</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Strong’s Online; Friberg Lexicon.

<sup>33</sup> Friberg Lexicon; Stephanus 1550 NT.

<sup>34</sup> Strong’s Online.

of the simple [naïve, unsuspecting]” (Romans 16:18).<sup>35</sup> What is unmistakable is that there will be those who begin to walk by faith in Christ through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God, who will fall for the persuasive words and grand claims of these false teachers (Matthew 24:24). Peter says that “it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known *it*, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (2 Peter 2:21). The truth that is coming through is this: if you have never known the way of truth (the Lord Jesus Christ), then there is hope that you might still yield to Him and be saved; however, if you have known the way of righteousness (have been saved) and have turned away from it (apostatized), then you have just stepped beyond that hope.

The writer of Hebrews expounds on this same theme: “For if we sin wilfully [deliberately, intentionally] after that we have received the knowledge [a full or precise and correct knowledge] of the truth, there remaineth [continues to exist] [absolutely] no more sacrifice for sins, But [*only a terrible expectation of condemnation and intense divine action*], which shall devour [is about to consume] the adversaries. He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot [to treat with disdain] the Son of God, and hath counted [accounted, considered] the blood of the covenant, **wherewith he was sanctified** [made holy], an unholy thing, and hath done despite [insult] unto the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:26-29).<sup>36</sup> This is someone who deliberately sins, shows disdain for the shed blood of Christ by which he was made holy (he was truly born again!), and thereby has turned away from the only Hope of salvation. Having turned away from the Lord Jesus, there is no other sacrifice to which this person can appeal to find eternal life; he has become apostate and there is no way back! Indeed, it would be better that he had never fully known the truth, for then that hope would still be there. Earlier, the writer of Hebrews declared that “*it is impossible* for those who were once enlightened [imbued with saving knowledge] ... If they shall fall away [there is no *if* in the Greek; *having fallen away*], to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put *him* to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:4, 6).<sup>37</sup> Christ died **one time** to provide redemption for us; in like manner, we can only be born anew by Him **once**; after falling away, it is *impossible* to be renewed to salvation again. John stated: “And hereby we do know [are knowing] that we know [have known (perfect tense)] him [God], if we keep [are attending carefully to] his commandments” (1 John 2:3).<sup>38</sup> *Know*, as it appears the second time is in the perfect tense, which means that this *knowing* (understanding) was completed once in the past, it will not be repeated, but there are ongoing results from it.<sup>39</sup> What this means is that we can come to a saving knowledge of God only **once** (it cannot be repeated); the one who is apostate has turned his back on God and cannot return to that place of *full knowledge* again.

Regarding the matter of the finality of apostasy, the question has come to me: “What about Jeremiah 3:1?” It reads: “They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become

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<sup>35</sup> Friberg Lexicon.

<sup>36</sup> Strong’s Online; Stephanus 1550 NT.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>39</sup> Strong’s Online; <http://www.ntgreek.net/lesson23.htm>.



another man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted? but thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the LORD." The reason that this verse was brought up within this context is because of the phrase *yet return again to me*, which makes it sound like God is prepared to take an apostate people back. The concern is that this appears to contradict many of the Scriptures at which we have just looked. I have been told by a Hebrew scholar that in the Hebrew this particular phrase does not include anything to indicate whether it is a question, a command, or an expression of incredulity (unlike the phrases just prior to it).<sup>40</sup> The general consensus from reviewing several sources is that this phrase should be taken as a question primarily because of the context – in essence the phrase should read: *will you return to me again?*

The passage that supports the questions raised in Jeremiah 3:1 is Deuteronomy 24:1-4 – "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give *it* in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's *wife*. And *if* the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth *it* in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her *to be* his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that *is* abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance." The law here is that if a man divorces his wife, then he cannot take her again if she has been married to another and, subsequently, she is either divorced or widowed. Are Jeremiah 3 and Deuteronomy 24 speaking about the same thing?

The latter passage is very clear as it applies to an individual's situation, and, because it is brought into Jeremiah 3, it would seem safe to assume that it must have a bearing on what Jeremiah is writing. However, there is also a significant difference. As is so often the case in the Old Testament, Israel and Judah (as nations) are spoken of, and addressed, as individuals, even though, clearly, there are phenomenal differences between an individual and a nation. Jeremiah begins with *they say*, and, although he does not quote the Law of Moses on this matter, he very clearly lays out the principles that were established in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Then, as a matter of contrast, the Lord says: "but thou [Judah] hast played the harlot with many lovers" (Jeremiah 3:1) – referring specifically to Judah's failure to remain faithful to Jehovah and the Law of Moses. It would seem that God draws the contrast in order to make the point that Judah has thoroughly polluted, or defiled, the land by her spiritual harlotry – this takes the matter well beyond what is described in Deuteronomy 24. The violence that Israel and Judah have done to the spiritual marriage relationship with Jehovah surpasses what God declared to be a defilement of the land on a personal level. God had given apostate Israel a bill of divorcement and sent her into exile to provide Judah with a reason to mend her ways (Jeremiah 3:8); yet Judah's actions after Israel was taken captive, made Israel appear to be righteous by comparison (Jeremiah 3:11). As nations, Judah and Israel were both apostate; however, within those nations there would have been individuals who were: 1) truly apostate (they had turned away from God and His ways), 2) simply pagan (they had never

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<sup>40</sup> Personal correspondence with Vern Steiner, <http://miqra.net/>

claimed to have faith in God), and 3) faithful to the Lord (a remnant, when compared to the rest of the population). The prophets, like Jeremiah, would have been among that faithful remnant.

This exposure of the sins of Judah (and Israel before her) is followed by a glimpse into the compassion of God: “Turn, O backsliding [literally, apostate] children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion ...” (Jeremiah 3:14). This is addressed to the “north” (Jeremiah 3:12), to where apostate Israel dwelt before they were taken into captivity for their apostasy. Even though God had put Israel away, He still considered the “marriage” to be in place; Israel had failed to keep her covenant with God, but He remembered His commitment to Israel. However, despite the fact that God was still committed to a relationship with Israel, notice that He will choose *one* here and *two* there, and will bring them to Zion – a sign of a restored relationship, but **not** for apostate Israel as a nation. It would be those individuals, who placed their faith in God, who would be chosen to enter into this relationship with Him – the one here, and two there. Jesus said: “For many are called, but few *are* chosen” (Matthew 22:14); “Enter ye in at the strait gate ... Because strait *is* the gate, and narrow *is* the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). God will never lower His standards so as to include apostates or pagans in His fold of redeemed saints; He is not an Ecumenical thinker – He will not turn a blind eye to error.

Evangelicals today have bought into the deadly combination of “pray this prayer and you are saved,” and God will then keep you no matter how you live (I deal with this more thoroughly in “Eternal Security”).<sup>41</sup> The theologians and teachers within both liberal and conservative Evangelicalism are selective in their application of the Scriptures and will typically avoid, or gloss over, those passages that might call their theologies into question or fail to support their thinking. Their blind followers either no longer believe that they are responsible to check all things according to the Word of God (1 John 4:1) or they are too apathetic to care, and so the majority of Evangelicals (and a growing number of conservatives) have been duped into believing lies and half-truths (a more convincing form of lies), which will lead to their spiritual demise (apostasy). Paul warned the Galatians that if they accepted the doctrine of the Judaizers (who were mixing faith in Christ with keeping the Law of Moses for salvation) then they have *fallen from [the] grace* (Galatians 5:4). This is not backsliding (as the margin of my Bible erroneously says), but it is **apostasy**; they were not sliding away from the truth but rather, they were willfully turning their backs on it – not by denying the centrality of faith in Christ, but by adding to it. What we must not miss is that there is a persuasion that takes place; apostasy requires a personal decision – you cannot stumble into apostasy; you go there by making a conscious choice (even if your choice might **appear** to be what is *right*, which is why we must test all things against God’s Word [1 John 4:1]).

The false prophets will make their fair-sounding, deceitful speeches even while they profess to be of the fold of God – they will do their best to appear to be sheep and try their utmost to speak a *sheepish* dialect. Many of their words may well sound familiar to the child of God but they will always carry a *wolfish* accent; they will speak lies in *hypocrisy* (1 Timothy 4:2) – i.e., their lies

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.thenarrowtruth.com/eternal-security.html>

will come forth under the guise of truth. Paul goes on to describe these hypocritical liars as *having their conscience seared with a hot iron*. The phrase *seared with a hot iron* is one word in Greek (*kauteriazō*; from which we get our word *cauterize*) and is in the perfect tense describing an action that has been completed in the past, but with ongoing results.<sup>42</sup> Just as we saw earlier, we can be redeemed only **once**, and so, too, we become apostate only **once**! The desensitized or deadened conscience of these apostate teachers and leaders (Paul says that they have departed *from the faith* – 1 Timothy 4:1) is a completed reality; we must recognize that there is no hope for those who have apostatized – they cannot be restored to faith in God. “For *it is impossible* [unable to be done] for those who were once enlightened (imbued, or saturated, with saving knowledge) ... [having fallen away] to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify [are crucifying] to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put [exposing] *him* to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:4, 6).<sup>43</sup> This is someone who has had their conscience *cauterized* – someone who has fallen away from the faith. Peter warned that there would be those among us who would seek to destroy others even as they themselves had been destroyed: “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies [sneak in destructive doctrines leading to separation from the truth of God (Romans 16:17)], even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1). Their destruction is sealed and irrevocable even though they might still continue to live physically, teach their lies and even claim to be of the fold of God. We must take heed, for their speeches may well be alluring (Romans 16:18); we must continually test all things by the Word of God (1 John 4:1, and 2 Corinthians 13:5a). What the Galatians failed to do was to identify the men from Jerusalem as false teachers – wolves in sheep’s clothing – and avoid them.

The book, *The Truth War*, which bears John MacArthur’s name, is just such a case – yes, a wolf trying to appear to be a sheep. In defining the word *apostasy*, MacArthur says that it “is closely related to the Greek word for ‘divorce.’ It speaks of abandonment, a separation, a defection ....”<sup>44</sup> This is an acceptable definition of the term (as we saw earlier), and its similarity to the Greek word for the bill of divorce is an interesting parallel.<sup>45</sup> However, he no sooner provides this clear definition when he makes this statement: “Can a genuine Christian fall away from the faith and become apostate? No. ... Those who do depart from the faith ... simply demonstrate that they never had true faith to begin with.”<sup>46</sup> His definition of *apostasy* and this subsequent statement do not fit together – they are obviously contradictory. Consider that a divorce (which MacArthur likens to apostasy) can only be issued when a man and a woman are married (in Bible times this included the time of betrothal, or engagement). If a couple dates for many years (or shacks up, as in our day) and then breaks up, there is no divorce because they have not come into a marriage relationship – they simply go their separate ways. For a divorce to take place, the two people must be married. Yet when MacArthur applies this parallel principle within the Christian realm, he

<sup>42</sup> Strong’s Online; [https://www.ntgreek.org/learn\\_nt\\_greek/verbs1.htm](https://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/verbs1.htm).

<sup>43</sup> Strong’s Online; Stephanus 1550 NT.

<sup>44</sup> John MacArthur, *The Truth War*, p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Apostasy is the Greek word *apostasía*, often translated as *falling away* (2 Thessalonians 2:3); the Greek word for *divorced* is *apoluo*, often translated as *put away* (Matthew 5:32); the word for bill or writing of divorcement is *apostasion*, much closer to apostasy.

<sup>46</sup> MacArthur, *Truth*, p. 43.

contradicts himself; he does so by saying that a divorce takes place (apostasy) even though the two (Christ and the individual) were never spiritually married; even though “they never had true faith to begin with” (i.e., they were not in a spiritual marriage relationship with the Lord), he calls this apostasy! This does not fit with the term, even as he has defined it – but there’s more!

MacArthur goes on to appeal to the parable of the soils in support of his position and says that the “greatest threat of all [“to the spiritual well-being of the church”] comes from the shallow-soil hearers.”<sup>47</sup> He goes on to quote part of what Jesus said; here are Jesus’ words: “They on the rock *are they*, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while **believe** [*are believing (pisteuo)*], and in time of temptation fall away [*aphistemi*: to revolt, withdraw from, desert]” (Luke 8:13).<sup>48</sup> The word *believe* is in the present tense and active voice – **they** are believing; they may well have grown *on the rock*, but they **are believing** (this is something that they are doing). Consider John’s words: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, *even to them that believe* [*are believing* (present tense)] on his name ...” (John 1:12).<sup>49</sup> *Believe*, in both cases, is from the same Greek word (just different moods), yet there would be no question that John is referring to those who are truly born-again as they are called “the sons of God.” Jesus said of the “shallow-soil hearers” that for a time they *are believing*, but, when a trial comes their way, they *fall away*, or withdraw, or become apostate.<sup>50</sup> Using MacArthur’s definition, their falling away speaks of *abandonment*, *separation*, and *defection* (in each case you cannot abandon, separate, or defect from something of which you have never been a part). As MacArthur tries to build his case he says: “They **give every appearance** of genuine life and viability” (emphasis added).<sup>51</sup> However, an illusion is not the same as the real thing, and the two must never be confused. Two people might live together and “appear” to be married, but if they aren’t married, then there is no divorce when they part company – they simply go their separate ways. Jesus said that they *believe* (are believing) – the Word of God produced life (not an illusion of life); MacArthur chooses to contradict the Lord and say that they only appeared to have life. “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). The Greek word translated as *departing* is the same one translated as *fall away* in Jesus’ parable of the soils – it means to *become apostate*.<sup>52</sup>

Seeking to twist the clear teachings of Scripture does not change the reality of God’s Word – *let God be true* and all theologians liars (Romans 3:4). “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but ... shall [there is an additional word in Greek: *certainly*] turn away [*apostrepho* – turn back] *their* ears from the truth, and shall be turned [*ektrepo* – turned aside] unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4)<sup>53</sup>; Paul is not referring to the godless, but to Christians who, through a lack of Biblical reproof, rebuke, and exhortation (2 Timothy 4:2), develop appetites for the smooth words of those who do not teach the truth. Evangelicals despise reproof and exhortation, and

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<sup>47</sup> MacArthur, p. 63.

<sup>48</sup> Strong’s Online.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Friberg Lexicon.

<sup>51</sup> MacArthur, *Truth*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> Friberg Lexicon; interestingly, the Friberg Lexicon draws Luke 8:13 and Hebrews 3:12 together.

<sup>53</sup> Strong’s Online.

consider it to be harsh and judgmental; consequently, it should not come as a surprise that they gather to themselves teachers who provide them with flattering homilies and soft words of encouragement. They consider the only acceptable justification for exhortation to be when it is directed at someone who is living Biblically – after all, who do they think that they are? They will identify them as being legalists and narrow-minded bigots who cause division and strife among those who are loving and accepting of everyone! Despite their spiritual optimism and generous accommodation of heretics of all flavors, the Ecumenical Evangelical panders after a gospel that has been shot through with the devil's lies. God is NOT Ecumenical, and He calls us to a narrow pathway in Christ (Matthew 7:13-14).

To the *angel*, or messenger, of the *ekklesia* at Sardis, Jesus said: “He that overcometh<sup>54</sup>, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not [the Greek uses a double negative for emphasis] blot out [erase, eradicate, wipe out; future tense] his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels” (Revelation 3:5).<sup>55</sup> The pronouns and verbs used here are all singular – God does not deal with groups for salvation, nor does He remove groups from His Book of Life. God will not wipe out the names of those who are remaining pure before Him (they have not defiled their garments – Revelation 3:4); on the other hand, to those who have defiled their garments, who have failed to remain faithful (i.e., they are apostate), the reality is that their names have been removed from the Book of Life. This is very similar to the picture of the Olive Tree and the branches that Paul uses in Romans 11: the wild branches are grafted into the Tree by faith, and they remain there by faith (Romans 11:20-21). However, faithlessness will result in them being broken off; in like manner, we have our names entered into the Book of Life by faith in Christ – the moment that we become apostate (become faithless), our names are removed from the Book. To those whose names are not in the Book of Life (those who have never placed their faith in Christ for the redemption of their souls, and those who have turned their backs on the salvation that comes only through Christ), they will stand before God on that final judgment day to be judged according to their works (Revelation 20:13). The outcome will be the Lake of Fire for all of them, for no one can be justified by their works (Galatians 2:16). God takes no pleasure in this; “As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11). We were created for fellowship with the Lord; He has provided the way to life for all of mankind through Jesus Christ, His Son, and yet many still look for another way.

What should seem very evident, but which needs to be repeated (because there is so much confusion in this matter), is that you cannot forsake, withdraw from, or desert something of which you have never been a part. For those who only profess to be Christians (and this would include most Evangelicals today) and then begin to live after the manner of this world, they are **not** apostate – they are simply living according to the dictates of their still sinful hearts. Apostasy is a serious matter, and the warnings in Scripture are numerous – we must take heed “lest there be in any[one]

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<sup>54</sup> Strong's Online: “hold fast their faith even unto death against the power of their foes, and temptations and persecutions.”

<sup>55</sup> Strong's Online.

of [us] an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). Permit the Spirit’s words, through John, to seep into your heart: “And this is his [God’s] commandment, That we should believe [to be persuaded; subjunctive mood (indicating that it is a possibility but not a certainty – we have a choice!); active voice (**we** must choose to believe)] on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth [is keeping (present tense)] his commandments dwelleth [is dwelling (present tense)] in him [God], and he [God] in him. And hereby we know [are knowing (present tense)] that he abideth [is abiding (present tense)] in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (1 John 3:23-24).<sup>56</sup> If we are believing, then we must also be obeying His commands! “Examine [test] yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove [check to see if you are genuine in the light of the Scriptures] your own selves” (2 Corinthians 13:5a); we must use the Word of God as the Standard by which we evaluate our spiritual walk. God has called us with a holy calling (2 Timothy 1:9); we must strive to walk faithfully in accordance with what He has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10). As we focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, immerse ourselves in His Word and seek to live in obedience to Him, then, and only then, will we be equipped to remain faithfully in Christ and avoid the pit of apostasy.

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<sup>56</sup> Strong’s Online.