

Apostasy and Arminian Theology

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Abstract: Arminian theology holds to the possibility a genuine believer in Christ can turn away and become apostate — departing from the faith so as to lose the divine gift of salvation. Whereas this position differs remarkably from the Reformed or Calvinist position, this paper will seek to present the Arminian position without necessarily engaging, either polemically or apologetically, what Calvinism believes and teaches.

It is an awful thing to grieve the Holy Spirit by casting away your confidence in God and depreciating the mighty works He has wrought in your heart. — William Godbey.¹

Trends in the American Church. The attraction of “brick and mortar” churches has been on a decline for several years; undergirding that decline has been a decline in interest in all things connected to the institutional church. According to data collected by the Barna Group, an alarming downward trend has been in view since 2000:

- In 2000, 83% of American adults identified as Christian; in 2025, that number fell to 71%.
- The percentage of Christians attending church monthly has declined from 66% (2000) to 59% (2025).
- Only 31% of Christians firmly believe they have an obligation to witness for Christ (2025), compared to 35% in 2000.

¹ William B. Godbey, *Apostasy* (Wilmore, KY: First Fruits Press, 2017), 32.

- As to the place of religious faith in one's life, 74% in 2000 felt it was important, but in 2025, that number fell 20 points to 54%.²

Further, from data accumulated from January 2000 and October 2025, adults identifying as “non-practicing Christians” was at 48%, while those identifying as “practicing Christians” was less by half, at 24%.³ Daniel Copeland, vice-president of research at Barna, noted that spiritual openness is rising but “key markers of Christian conviction remain flat.” There are nuances; younger adults as a group are demonstrating a heightened interest in the Bible, in Jesus, and are contributing to a rise in church attendance. But overall, for many who once identified as Christian, their spiritual journey no longer is focused on the Christ of the Bible.

The question that needs to be asked is: of those who have identified as no longer a practicing Christian, are they to be viewed as apostate, or from a Reformed view, were they never truly saved in the first place? In Reformed/Calvinistic theology, those who are truly saved will persevere to the end; for them, apostasy is impossible.

David Kinnaman's research has shown that childhood influences in church attendance cause many to identify as Christian, but far too often, that influence produces a “faith” that is “often shallow and on the surface”, for the motivation is more a “cultural identification” instead of a genuine, deeply held faith.⁴ Kinnaman defines “prodigals” as “those who lose their faith”, disengaging completely from their former faith-journey. He gives an example of a prodigal, named “Mike.”

² “Faith’s Shrinking Influence: What 25 Years of Data Reveals”, <https://www.barna.com/trends/faiths-shrinking-influence/>, accessed March 4, 2026.

³ “Faith’s Shrinking Influence”, s. v.

⁴ David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 23.

Mike typifies a prodigal, an ex-Christian. He grew up in the Catholic church, but his love for science and his razor-sharp wit—which was sometimes perceived as disrespect—regularly put him at odds with the parish leaders. After a period of searching and wrestling with his faith, he says, “I just stopped believing in those Christian stories.” Time will tell if Mike will return to faith later in life. But usually the attitudes of prodigals seem closed to such outcomes.⁵

Kinnaman claims the struggles most chronologically young Christians have is not as much with their faith *per se* but with the institutional nature of the organized church. The prodigals are the smallest group; the other two groups, the nomads (wandering from church to church) and the exiles (still involved but feel stuck) here far larger than those giving up their faith and moving on.⁶ While it is cause for rejoicing over the nomads and the exiles, who still are interested in their faith journeys, the presence of any prodigals, who like “Mike”, have turned away from the faith they once knew, is alarming.

Departing the faith. Beyond a concise, and perhaps a bit sterile, definition of apostasy, or, “falling away”, it might be helpful to briefly examine what it typically meant by “falling away” from the faith, particularly the Christian faith.⁷

“Falling away” is:

- A fundamental change in one’s relationship with the Lord.
- A changing faith tradition.

⁵ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 26.

⁶ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 27.

⁷ See Brian Simmons, *Falling Away: Why Christians Lose Their Faith and What Can Be Done About It* (2nd ed.) (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2008),

- Disassociating (from) any religious organization.

The difficulty of determining what apostasy or “falling away” looks like stems from the difficulty in obtaining empirical evidence one way or the other.

It is obviously extremely difficult, if not inherently impossible, to submit one’s unique, spirit-filled relationship with the Lord to scientific verification; that is, in order to empirically and objectively study the falling away process, you have to be able to see “it” and say “You’ve got an authentic relationship with the Lord” and later be able to see “it” and say “Now you *don’t* have an authentic relationship with the Lord.”⁸

Motivators for choosing to turn away from Christian faith are perhaps as varied as the people who make that choice. Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), an economist and philosopher during the so-called Victorian age, chose to abandon his Anglican roots for a generally vague “theism”, perhaps mirroring the growing secularism of the day. His theistic views, which were described as “highly individual and deliberately tentative”, affected how he viewed life itself; in 1860 he penned a letter to a colleague, noting that “a great gulf” existed between him and his Anglican confession. An 1862 correspondence with another colleague exposed the religious battle within him: ““You see, I still hunger and thirst after orthodoxy: but I am, I trust, firm not to barter my intellectual birthright for a mess of mystical pottage.”⁹ Sidgwick chose the non-mystical world of economics over a Biblically sourced faith. The question of whether he had become

⁸ Simmons, *Falling Away*, 6.

⁹ Steven G. Medema, “‘Losing My Religion’: Sidgwick, Theism, and the Struggle for Utilitarian Ethics in Economic Analysis”, *Keeping Faith, Doing Faith: Religious Belief and Political Economy* (Bradley Bateman and H. Spencer Bahnzaf, eds.) (Annual Supplement to Volume 40, *History of Political Economy*) (Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2008), 189-211.

apostate is perhaps first framed in whether his convictions in his early life were those of someone who was saved. It seems clear, however, that he considered the truth of the Scriptures to be “a mess of mystical pottage.” Was he reprobate (never saved) or was he apostate?

It would be logical to theorize anyone who thought of Christian belief as a “mess of mystical pottage” was not genuinely saved. That aside, in Sidgwick’s case, it was his desire for a utilitarian economic model which occupied his attention, one free from religious influences or constraints. Drawing from Sidgwick’s example, on a general basis, it could be asserted that that the pursuit of any aspect of life apart from a grounded faith in Christ, where faith becomes either secondary or non-existent, would be a case of apostasy if that person once confessed Christ as Savior. That secularized pursuit becomes an idol, replacing the proper devotion to God.

Robert Taylor (1784-1844) was studying to be a physician when through the influence of a “Calvinist preacher”, abandoned medicine for the ministry. He was only four years into his journey to become an Anglican cleric when he read Thomas Paine and Edward Gibbon, skeptics whose reasonings shook Taylor’s Christian convictions to the core. He became convinced everything he had learned about the Christian faith, indeed, the Christian faith itself, “is the greatest curse that ever befell the human race.”¹⁰

Taylor left the ministry only to return to it a few years later, but the unbelief evidenced in his preaching soon had him branded as an infidel cleric. He founded a society dedicated to “promote evidence for unbelief”. For his efforts, he endured two prison terms and banishment from the pulpit.¹¹

¹⁰ As quoted in Ruth Tucker, *Walking Away from Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 93.

¹¹ Tucker, *Walking Away from Faith*, 93.

Biographies do not necessarily make conclusions about whether a certain individual was saved or just “religious”. Making religious judgments is perhaps outside a biography’s intent, except where the individual profiled makes a statement one way or another. Such is the case of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Although he was raised in a pietistic¹² environment, he eventually came to the conclusion that “external” influences (such as the Bible?) Should be rejected in favor of an embrace of “enlightenment”. His view was simple: “Mankind is in the process of coming of age, refusing to take external authorities and judging everything by its own understanding.”¹³ Kant’s philosophy brought a melding, so to speak, of British empiricism and Continental rationalism, where human experience based on human belief reigned supreme. He believed it was possible to know and understand the material world, which then substantiated man’s inability to know whatever is theorized to lie beyond the material. Thus for Kant, it is not possible for man to know of or about “God, the soul, or life beyond death.”¹⁴ He rejected the three traditionally offered “proofs” for Christian faith: ontological, cosmological, and teleological. He did not outright reject God, but neither did he believe in the possibility of empirically proving God, either.¹⁵

Kant believed man could be virtuous, which runs counter to the Biblical position that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). He insisted:

But whoever preaches the non-existence of virtue, of the germ of what is good in man, implies thereby that we are all rogues by nature and that no man is to be

¹² Pietism tends to place more weight on Christian living as a practically and less on more structured things like theology or ecclesiology: “Pietists are people of the heart for whom Christian living is the fundamental concern.... (They) are serious about holy living and expend every effort to follow God’s law” (Mark A. Noll, “Pietism”, *EDT*, 855-856).

¹³ Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 91.

¹⁴ M. D. Geldard, “Kant, Immanuel”, *NDT*, 484, 495.

¹⁵ Brown, *Philosophy*, 99.

trusted who is not enlightened by the grace and the help of God. Yet those who so argue forget that such a society of fundamentally evil human beings would be altogether unworthy of God's aid. For just as the angelical and divine conception of good is of something wholly free of evil, so also the conception of satanic evil is pure in its kind, being the conception of something wholly free of any germ of good, even of any will to good. How then could it be possible that men cut out on such a pattern could receive God's aid? God would have to recreate them, not help and support them. It follows, therefore, that there must be virtue in man.¹⁶

Whether Kant rejected a genuine faith inculcated through his pietistic upbringing or never actually embraced what his parents practiced in the home cannot be definitively identified from information on his life. Tucker notes, "Kant viewed the existence of God as a reality only in human consciousness."¹⁷ If he did, in his younger years, embrace the pietistic faith of his parents, Kant's adulthood writings would then more than likely demonstrate he chose to apostatize in favor of humanistic philosophy.

Tucker's book chronicles the struggles of several prominent and not so well known individuals who appear to have rejected the historic Christian faith, even after being numbered as one who believed, and settled into a life of distance from a genuine relationship with Christ by faith. For example:

- Elmer Miller, a former Mennonite missionary and faculty member at Temple University, whose doubts about Christianity led him to completely abandon the faith,

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (tr. Louis Infield) (Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, UK: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 91.

¹⁷ Tucker, *Walking Away from Faith*, 99.

eventually to attend a liberal Mennonite fellowship where he is free to not believe anything Biblical.¹⁸

- Michael Paul Gallagher, a Roman Catholic priest, who fell into severe doubt of the truth of Scripture after he had been consecrated as a priest and assigned to a parish. He came to believe that if faith were in any way possible, it would be less structured on objective truth and more on life and love.¹⁹

Kinnaman opines the swift changes in culture are major contributors to certain age demographics, such as Mosaics, choosing to step away from their previously held faith and beliefs. The rapid advance of the currently advanced technological age has proved multiple ports of access to a plethora of views, interests, and influences. One example Kinnaman shares is of a fifteen-year-old male who through the Internet was able to explore pornography which eventually transformed into direct, physical sexual encounters. He began to wrestle with his faith, even to the point of considering giving up on Christian belief altogether, thinking his destiny was nothing more than to live his life ensnared in sexual sin.²⁰ From a Biblical view, believers are commanded to obedience to the will of God, which includes being sanctified and avoiding sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). Choosing to give in to the bondage of sexual sin is both a deliberate act of disobedience as well as establishing a “god” other than the Lord. As strong as the temptation generated by sexual sin is, the promise of Scripture is plain: God is faithful, and in His faithfulness He will not allow one of His own to be bowled over by sin; when temptation to sin comes, He is faithful to provide a means of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13).

For those who decided to apostatize, even choose atheism, is

¹⁸ Tucker, *Walking Away from Faith*, 128-129.

¹⁹ Tucker, *Walking Away from Faith*, 130-131.

²⁰ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 40-41.

there any evidence their lives were worse than when they claimed faith? Phil Zuckerman's treatment of the motivations for people to leave their faith documented how the "apostasy worldview" tends to have a much stronger moral compass than those who remain within the boundaries of an expression of Christian faith.

In the aftermath of their loss of faith, do they subsequently experience a loss of moral direction? Do they find it harder to make ethical choices and live moral lives? The answer to both of these questions appears to be an unequivocal "no." They did not experience a loss of moral focus after rejecting religion and they did not find it harder to make moral choices once they had abandoned their faith. This finding helps to establish the important fact that morality is certainly possible without religion or a belief in God. But I would even take it a step farther and argue that morality actually improves after individuals undergo a transition from being religious to secular. As many apostates emphatically explained to me, their own personal morality was sharpened, enhanced, and ultimately became more mature once they left religion behind.²¹

In his interviews of people who chose to apostatize, Zuckerman found the reasons for their change in thinking were generally not attributable to one large, perhaps cataclysmic event. For the majority of those interviewed, the decision to leave faith/belief in God tended to simply be a gradual process, sometimes taking two to three years or more. One man was so emotionally struck by the children he saw suffering in a cancer ward that he decided against belief in God who would allow such suffering, while a woman read atheist Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*, which was enough to persuade her to apostatize. A college student, attending a Bible college, saw graffiti

²¹ Phil Zuckerman, *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford, 2012), 122.

expressing hatred towards gays. Though not gay himself, the horrible intolerance moved him to reconsider why he believed in God at all.²²

Zuckerman compiled the most common reasons he heard from his interviews for why people chose to apostatize:

1. *Parents.* Influence by parents tends to be a major contributor to the child's decision about faith.
2. *Education.* Exposure to secular collegiate education "caused (people) to scrutinize their own values and beliefs."
3. *Misfortune.* Experiencing loss such as death or prolonged pain because of illness has caused some to question God's goodness, and then ultimately, to abandon believing in Him at all.
4. *Other cultures, other religions.* Learning how other people, other cultures do things, what they value, what outlooks they have, can have a profound effect on maintaining faith.
5. *Friends, colleagues, lovers.* Conversations with others which sow seeds of doubt or work to argue a person out of their faith.
6. *Politics.* In America, conservative ("right-wing") politics, embracing often "draconian" positions, such as support for the death penalty, tends to be populated more with those who identify as conservative Christians, while liberal/progressive ("left-wing") politics tends to "distance...from religiously linked political conservatism."
7. *Sex.* Religious restrictions on sexual behaviors, such as "who one can have sex with, as well as when, where, and how", plays against basic human desires, moving people

²² Zuckerman, *Faith No More*, 153.

into a “guilt-free” atmosphere where there is no religious encumbrance.

8. *Satan and hell.* People who sense they are being motivated to remain in their religious expression through heavy doses of fear, such as the devil and hell, tend to turn away from those beliefs and eventually from any religious belief at all.
9. *Malfeasance of religious associates.* The hypocrisy of immorality within a religious context, or evidence of domestic abuse in a theoretically Christ-following family, can alienate from continuing in that religious expression.²³

Zuckerman’s list is not necessarily exhaustive; other reasons or sub-sets of the reasons given could legitimately be considered. In a limited college study, one responder rebelled against the heavy-handed tactics used in his childhood home to keep religion at a high priority; another participant, identifying as bisexual, felt hostility and rejection from those who attended church and identified as strong Christian believers.²⁴

Simmons’ discussion on causes for apostasy begins with the understanding that “who we are as individuals plays an extremely important role in the unraveling of our faith.” Not everyone is “equally at risk” to fall into apostasy; this is not a necessary thing but is extremely contingent, based on various choices and motivations.²⁵

Nothing in the Bible supports any thought that sin will of necessity overpower a Christian to the point of “falling away”. Paul Himes a decade ago argued strongly for the setting of 1 Corinthians 10:13 as indicating the believer’s libertarian

²³ Zuckerman, *Faith No More*, 122-164.

²⁴ Sammie Louise Davis Dyson, “Leaving the Faith: Factors That Lead to Emerging Adult Apostasy”, (unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, Liberty University, 2002), 1-132.

²⁵ Simmons, *Falling Away*, 69-70.

freedom when confronted by sin. He draws from Anthony Thiselton who wrote that Paul is not encouraging the people not to sin as much as he is rebuking believers who claim they do not have a choice when faced with temptations fraught with societal pressures (in this case, the cultic meals offered to idols).²⁶ He further argues that “temptation” (*peirasmos*) should be understood as “both an external and internal influence. On the one hand it has to do with the desires of the heart, but this concept is not incompatible with external temptation to sin as described in Scripture.”²⁷ In either case, God provides a way out, a means by which one’s faith is not compromised by acceding to some form of sin. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, and through the knowledge of the Word (Psalm 119:11), the believer is enabled to resist the siren song of the temptation. Himes then refers to Bruce Ware, noting:

Yet Ware is certainly correct when he states that “as we become more like Christ, we choose and act more like Christ” and that such change depends on whether or not “we submit to the disciplines of the Spirit.” Such transformation naturally causes our desires to change.²⁸

It would follow, then, if a believer chooses to allow drift (Hebrews 2:1), fails to remain focused on Christ (Hebrews 3:1), or stops pursuing faith (Hebrews 4:1-2), then falling into the snare of sin is probable, and if the sin is allowed to take root and assume control, then apostasy is, in fact, possible.²⁹

²⁶ Paul Himes, “When a Christian Sins: 1 Corinthians 10:13 and the Power of Contrary Choice in Relation to the Compatibilist-Libertarian Debate”, *JETS* 54.2 (June 2011), 335-336.

²⁷ Himes, “When a Christian Sins”, 337.

²⁸ Himes, “When a Christian Sins”, 342.

²⁹ For a different view on 1 Corinthians 10:13 and a critique of Himes, see Steven Cowan, “Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 Imply Libertarian Freedom? A Reply to Paul Himes”, *JETS* 55.4 (December 2012), 793-800. See also the rejoinder; Paul Himes, “First Corinthians 10:13: A Rejoinder to Steve Cowan”, *JETS* 55.4 (December 2012), 801-806.

It is best, however, to exhort believers of the certainty of assurance of salvation through the Holy Spirit “inwardly actuating the believer and by the fruits of faith.”³⁰ As Picirilli observed:

...believers ought to be exhorted and nurtured in spiritual development. ...the entire epistle of 2 Peter presents this as the one way to be sure that one will not apostatize.³¹

Arminians believe the action of the Holy Spirit, continuously working in the heart of the believer, is the basis for having assurance.³² When the Spirit is actively working in a person’s life, the fact the Spirit is holy means that sanctification “is the predictable result of the Spirit’s presence in one’s life.”³³

Here I would hasten to add that assurance is a necessary result of obedience to God’s will; only in doing the will of God consistently and constantly will any believer know the blessings which come to those who are obedient (cf. Colossians 1:22-23). Assurance fades when a person chooses to follow his or her own selfish will instead of continually, in faith, remaining obedient to what God requires. It is a matter of loving God above all things (John 14:15, 15:14). Obedience feeds assurance.³⁴

When Israel had entered into the Promised Land, God warned them through Joshua of the dangers they would face once they had taken possession of the land and lived there for some time,

³⁰ James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius* (tr. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), I:255.

³¹ Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Freewill* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2002), 208.

³² William J. Abraham, “Predestination and Assurance”, *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Clark Pinnock, ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie/Zondervan, 1989), 240.

³³ William G. Macdonald, “...The Spirit of Grace (Hebrews 10:29)”, *Grace Unlimited* (Clark Pinnock, ed.) (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 90.

³⁴ William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 283-284.

dangers precipitated through their failure to remain faithful to the Lord.

“But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you” (Joshua 23:12-13)

Israel’s ability to possess what God promised them depended on two things: first, the covenant He had made with them through Abraham, and second, their continued faithfulness to that covenant arrangement. The warning to them was plain and it was definite: if they chose to turn away from that covenant, if they chose to be unfaithful to the Lord, if they chose to worship other gods, “the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land He has given you” (Joshua 23:16). The extended catena of blessings in Deuteronomy 28 were determined on whether the people chose to “fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commandments” (Deuteronomy 28:1) or a long list of curses if they failed to be fully obedient (Deuteronomy 28:15).³⁵

Israel’s history is a bleak picture of their failure to remain faithful to God and the covenant. Not long after Joshua’s death, the people lapsed into disobedience. They served the LORD while the elders remained who had outlived Joshua (Judges 1:7), but when that generation had also passed away, the next

³⁵ Some within Pentecostal and charismatic circles want to apply the blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1-14) as applicable to their situation today. However, three objections, as argued by J. Daniel Hays, need to be emphasized: (1) The Mosaic Code was conditional; (2) The Mosaic code is no longer a functional covenant, and (3) Christians are not under the OT law (Romans 7:4, Galatians 3:25. See J. Daniel Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today”, *BibSac* 158:629 (2001), 28.

generation “knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 1:10). They had been specifically told to annihilate the people in Canaan, destroying all the idols, carved images and the high places of their worship (Numbers 33:51-52), for the continued exposure to the pagan religious practices would eventually negatively affect Israel’s “life and well-being”.³⁶ Failure to to destroy the people and their false worship would bring certain punishment from the LORD.

But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them (Numbers 33:55-56).

Any dalliance with idolatrous practice was absolutely forbidden (Deuteronomy 4:15-20). To do so would make them “corrupt” (from *shāhat*, “to spoil” or “to ruin”)³⁷; when the people chose to worship the golden calf while Moses was in God’s presence on Mount Sinai receiving the divine law, the LORD told Moses that the people had become corrupt (*shāhat*) in worshiping that cast, golden idol (Exodus 32:7-8).³⁸

That generation after Joshua and the elders of his time “did evil in the eyes of the LORD and and served the Baals”, forsaking the

³⁶ Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers* (NCBC) (London, UK: Marshall Pickering and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 348-349. The warning about the negative impact of the pagan peoples on Israel was repeated in the course of preparing to enter the Promised Land: Exodus 23:33, 34:12; Deuteronomy 7:16; Joshua 23:13. See also Judges 2:3, where Yahweh sees the disobedience of His people and tells them He will no longer drive out the pagan nations, which means they will (certainly) become a snare to Israel.

³⁷ The ruination was typically a moral one. See Stephen D. Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 212, 213.

³⁸ Stephen G. Dempster, “Exodus and Biblical Theology: On Moving into the Neighborhood with a New Name”, *SBJT* 12.3 (2008), 8, rightly noted: “The people may be out of Egypt but Egypt remains in their heart.”

Lord by choosing to worship the “various gods of the people around them and the Ashtoreths” (Judges 2:12-13). God, however, remained faithful to what He had promised them, both positively and negatively; if they turned away to other gods, He would fight against them, He would allow them to be defeated by the very nations they were supposed to have driven out of the land, and they would be “in great distress” (Judges 2:14-15). They chose to turn away from Yahweh and turn to other, false deities. In this turning away, in this forsaking of the covenant the LORD had made with them, they fell into *apostasy*. From a proper “desire” to be in obedience to God comes the ability to make right moral judgments: “when the covenant relationship between God and God's people is neglected, the faculty of moral judgment atrophies.”³⁹ The eventual end of Israel’s presence in Canaan was attributed directly to their oft-recurring apostasy; the northern kingdom of Israel, led only by evil, apostate kings, went into exile because of their sin and constant, consistent rejection of the Lord God (1 Kings 17:7-18). The southern kingdom of Judah, which had some kings who were faithful to the Lord, nonetheless had a pattern of “mock(ing) God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy” (2 Chronicles 36:16). For that, they went into captivity and exile about 200 years after their northern brethren.

Is apostasy a genuine problem in the Church? Many indicators show the Church, particularly in the West, is in decline.⁴⁰ Some of the factors include anti-Christian sentiment manifesting in persecution, growing number of persons who consider themselves atheists, secularism, pluralism, relativism, and

³⁹ Paul Miller, “Moral Formation and the Book of Judges”, *EvQ* 75:2 (2003).

⁴⁰ According to the Barna Report, the number of people in the United States claiming to be a practicing Christian has fallen from 45% in 2000 to 25% in 2020, while those identifying as non-Christian has risen from 20% to 32% in the same time frame. See <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>, accessed March 10, 2026.

theological liberalism undermining the authority of Scripture. With the decline in Church involvement is a parallel decline in faith commitment. As persons lose their sense of “zeal and vitality” for the Church, they may well become “nominal” or even “non-practicing” Christians, which may then result in them completely abandoning their faith — becoming apostate. A catalyst for that move into an apostate condition is often “an increasing conviction that God and religion in the modern world is irrelevant.”⁴¹

Theological definition of apostasy. Sin, as understood in the Old Testament, is often pictured as “a falling away from God by His people.” When that happens, when His people reject the grace which He gives, “He deprives them of His presence and blessing and submits them to destruction and exile.” Thus, it is very true that “apostasy and its penalties are realities in the Old Testament.”⁴² Apostasy, in a simple sense, is *turning away* from God to *turn towards* something that is not Him. For some, this turning away is an irretractable state; no divine forgiveness is provided since the sinner “is not looking for it.”⁴³

A New Testament view of apostasy was suggested by F. F. Bruce through his analysis of 1 John 5:16-17 — “the sin unto death.” One way of understanding what John wrote is to take that “sin unto death” as apostasy, “specifically, the apostasy of those who had abandoned the primitive and authentic message and established a new basis for faith and life to replace ‘that which was from the beginning’ (1 John 2:18-23).”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Albert J. Coetsee, “A More Comprehensive Comprehension and Appropriate Application: An Answer to Dwindling Faith Commitment From the Book of Hebrews”, *IdS* 55.2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i2.2704>, accessed February 12, 2026.

⁴² I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 34.

⁴³ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 38.

⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, “The Sin Unto Death”, *Harvester* 11 (1987), 9.

Robert Picirilli explains that if faith is the singular condition for being saved, then unbelief would be “the condition of apostasy”; he argues, “...the retraction of faith is the only, final means of apostasy; apostasy is a willful retraction of faith.”⁴⁵ Referring to Hebrews 3:12, Picirilli points out the English “departing” in that verse has as its Greek root the same from which the English “apostasy” is derived (verb *apostēmi*; cognate noun *apostasia*), giving the sense of an unbelief which abandons hope”.⁴⁶ R. C. H. Lenski adds:

Whoever apostatizes from the incarnate Son as he is depicted in chapters one and two ⁴⁷ thereby apostatizes from God himself; after rejecting the Son, no man can hold to the Father, the living God, the Son being “his glory’s effulgence and his being’s impress.”⁴⁸

Apostasizing from the incarnate Son, Lenski adds, comes in once having believed in the one true and living God, then choosing to turn away in unbelief.⁴⁹ And, under the New Covenant, apostasy becomes so much a worse thing since the “message of grace and salvation was so much clearer in it than in the old covenant”. Persistently failing to pay “close attention to the Gospel...could lead to total apostasy.”⁵⁰

Apostasy, then, can be no other than a deliberately chosen state of turning away from (or, repudiating) belief in Christ as Savior. An apostate, then, is one who has willingly chosen to reject Christ after having embraced Christ and been identified as a

⁴⁵ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 205.

⁴⁶ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 215.

⁴⁷ Refers to Hebrews 1 and 2.

⁴⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), 118.

⁴⁹ Lenski, *Hebrews*, 118.

⁵⁰ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 151.

Christian.⁵¹ Heresy is not apostasy; one may differ from a cardinal Christian doctrine and maintain belief in Jesus Christ as Savior. Titus 3:10 refers to a “divisive person” (NIV) or “one who stirs up division” (ESV) (*hairesis anthrōpos*), a person who creates a division or a faction within the local fellowship by advocating a personal or private set of doctrines and maintains a set of followers.⁵² Heresy can exist without denying Christ as Savior. Heresy becomes apostasy when denying Christ gives space for choosing unbelief as to who He is as revealed in the Scripture.

Hebrews 3:12 speaks of “turning away” from God; although the term “apostasy” is not specifically used, to so turn away from God speaks of no less than apostasy.

*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful,
unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*

That the author addresses Christians is in the word “brothers”, a term which in early Christianity was nearly synonymous with with “disciple”, expressing “the bond between fellow believers and of the obligation to love one another (Romans 12:10, 1 Peter 3:8).”⁵³ The author is specifically addressing other Christians. He warns against any Christians finding themselves having allowed for a “sinful, unbelieving heart” (*kardia ponēra apistias*);⁵⁴ Lenski renders the verse: *see to it, brethren, perhaps there will be in someone of you a wicked heart of unbelief in apostatizing from the living God.*” He argues no greater wickedness exists than to fall into unbelief.⁵⁵ The progression is, through a failure to “pay more careful attention, therefore,

⁵¹ Teemu T. Mantsinen and Kati Tervo-Niemelä, “Leaving Christianity”, in Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson and Teemu T. Mantsinen, eds., *Handbook of Leaving Religion* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 67.

⁵² Oskar Skarsaune, “Heresy and the Pastoral Epistles”, *Themelios* 20.1 (October 1994), 9.

⁵³ R. S. Rayburn, “Christians, Names of”, *EDT*, 271.

⁵⁴ ESV: “an evil, unbelieving heart” is closer to the Greek text than the NIV.

⁵⁵ Lenski, *Hebrews*, 117.

to what we have heard, so that we do not “drift away from it” (ESV). To the early church, apparently, “to apostatize *after* believing is more dangerous than not to have believed at all.”⁵⁶ The reality of possibility cannot be dismissed, as some scholars do, as either a “hypothetical” or a “straw man” argument; F. F. Bruce argues, “Scripture is not given to the setting up of straw men”,⁵⁷ nor is there any evidence that God’s Word speaks hypothetically. Isaiah 46:10 affirms that what God speaks, His counsel, shall stand — it shall be accomplished as He spoke it. Things hypothetical are not real; they are speculative or theoretical. Isaiah 55:11 declares that the word which God speaks is never an useless word; it will accomplish the very thing for which it was originally sent.⁵⁸ It is difficult, except on purely theological reasoning, to dismiss any portion of the Scripture as “hypothetical”. If God placed warnings against apostatizing in His Word, whether in the Old or the New Testament, then He is warning against something that can and might happen if the believer does not follow the counsel and direction of the Scripture.

But if some who were genuinely saved then turned away from their belief into apostasy, would that then cast some kind of stain on the sovereignty of God? It is only a problem if one holds to the idea that God’s sovereign foreknowledge includes His sovereign foreordination; in other words, what He knows will unfailingly come to pass. F. Leroy Forlines has argued that causality is not “ascribed to foreknowledge”, for if foreknowledge were causal, then humans would have no “possibility of real contingencies.”⁵⁹ God remains sovereign in that He unfailingly knows what choices are made without making them necessities of His will. Nothing that happens is

⁵⁶ Frederick W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1888), 62 (*italics original*).

⁵⁷ F. F. Bruce, “Irretrievable Apostasy”, *Harvester* 10 (1987), 20.

⁵⁸ LXX: “It shall by no means turn back (or” return “), until all the things which I have willed shall have been accomplished.”

⁵⁹ F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2011), 76.

able to frustrate or prevent God's sovereign plan to come to pass. "The so-called 'certainty' of an event means nothing more than its 'eventness', the simple fact that it will occur — and God knows it will."⁶⁰ Thus, God knows who will receive the grace of God and who will subsequently spurn it through drift, inattention, to allowing the inculcation of a evil heart of subsequent unbelief. Therein lies the two edged sword of genuine free will: God allows for genuine human choice, and then holds the human wholly responsible for having made that choice.

One early critic of Calvinistic soteriology, which claims it is impossible for the true believer to ever apostatize, was Thomas Helwys (1550-1616), who was instrumental in the formation of the first Baptist congregation in England. Helwys adopted Arminian views on the whole of salvation, believing that if God foreordained the fall of man before it happened, then God becomes the author of evil. He argued that if Adam, when created, was told not to sin but then by a previous decree of God had no choice but to sin, then God must be the author of the very evil which was not part of the original creation. He believed, and rightly so, that salvation is through Christ alone, received through faith alone by grace alone, but that this grace is resistible.⁶¹ A resistible grace infers a genuine free will, even post-salvation. An unsaved person is made aware of the offer of salvation through *prevenient grace* — the grace which goes before — which comes prior to actual regeneration, which "opens the heart of the unregenerate (to uses the words of Acts 16:14) to the truth of the Gospel and enables them to respond positively in faith."⁶²

At no time is genuine free will made ineffective or unavailable. And, at no time does the Scripture teach apostasy is other than

⁶⁰ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 37.

⁶¹ J. Matthew Pinson, "The First Baptist Treatise on Predestination: Thomas Helwys's *Short and Plaine Proofoe*", *JBTM* 6.1 (Spring 2009), 151.

⁶² Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 154.

possible — not normal, certainly, and not inevitable,⁶³ but still genuinely possible if the believer does not continuously rely on the divinely supplied means of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Three passages, from Jesus, Paul and Peter, are helpful here.

The first, spoken by Jesus, is John 10:28-29.

“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Twice Jesus says that “no one” can snatch (*harpazo*) anyone from Jesus’ hand (His care and protection) whom the Father has given to Jesus. No outside agent can “muscle in” on God’s power and forcibly remove a person from relationship with the Savior. The issue is in the words “no one” — limiting the possibility of apostatizing to individual choice. Jesus knows for a certainty who will ultimately persevere and who will turn away.⁶⁴ His emphasis here is not on that understanding of who will persevere and who will apostatize; it is narrowly a declaration that no *outside* force of any kind is able to remove a person from God’s saving care.

Perseverance is akin to overcoming. Though the argument made in James E. Rosscup’s article on overcoming reflects a definitive Calvinistic bias, the same conclusion he draws could be applied to Arminians. Those who overcome are those who are “genuinely saved” and will receive all promised to them because of their relationship with Christ.⁶⁵ They remain in faith by grace, remain in obedience, and as such, will experience union with Christ into eternity. Those who fail to remain in faith

⁶³ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 268.

⁶⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), I:824.

⁶⁵ James E. Rosscup, “The Overcomer of the Apocalypse”, *GTJ* 3.2 (1982), 263.

through grace, who choose to return to their sin, will not overcome. Their separation from Christ is not of His volition; it is of theirs.

Paul declares the same basic idea of the impossibility of an outside source effecting a separation from God in Romans 8:35-39.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Whereas Jesus said "no one" (which includes Satan), Paul expands by saying "no thing" outside the believer is able to make a separation between that person and God. No enemy of the faith, regardless of its type, can force a loss of faith and subsequent separation from God's saving grace.⁶⁶ Paul says that neither death nor life in and of themselves can effectuate turning someone away from saving faith, although "life itself may turn us aside from the faith by reason of the lusts which it excites"⁶⁷ - the lusts being resistible temptations (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13) that prove to be deadly if they are not, in and through grace, resisted. Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, pointed out that God's will required believers to live sanctified

⁶⁶ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith and Free Will*, 202.

⁶⁷ Franz J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Cambridge, UK: James C. Clarke, 2022), 239.

(holy) lives, that sexual sin should be avoided, and each one “should learn” to keep the body “under control” - an exercise in free will to choose one’s behavior. As Linda McKinnish Bridges noted:

The believers must confront their behavior; they must self-inspect. They must decide if they are going to maintain control of their sexual urges. Paul gives them the opportunity to consider their actions and make appropriate changes.⁶⁸

Paul places every person claiming to be a Christian at a crossroads, so to speak. Again, as noted previously, he identifies what God's will is for believers in the area of sexuality. He further identifies specifics explaining what it is to be sanctified as opposed to licentious. The basic idea is in 1 Thessalonians 4:1 - how to live to please God through a continually increasing “desire and determination to bring pleasure to God.”⁶⁹ This is clearly a free will choice; it is not one styled as “free will” that is somehow coerced by God.⁷⁰ The crossroads, then, is whether to choose to please God or to allow evil in some form into the mind and choose against pleasing God.

While it would seem, perhaps, incomprehensible that anyone who has come into salvific relationship with Jesus Christ by grace and through faith would ever choose to return to the life of brokenness in sin, having a genuinely free will requires a focused “maintenance” of what has been received in and

⁶⁸ Linda McKinnish Bridges, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2008), 109.

⁶⁹ J. Gary Millar, *Changed Into His Likeness* (NSBT 55) (London, UK: Apollos and Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 146.

⁷⁰ “Monergism” holds to the idea that salvation is all of God with no cooperation or contribution from man “other than what God instills in that person.” Conversely, “synergism”, which in this paper is preferred, affirms salvation is wholly and completely of grace (as in Ephesians 2:8) but “requires free cooperation for it to be activated in a person’s life”. See Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 156.

through Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, by choosing holiness instead of giving space to temptation and being seduced away from one's relationship with the Savior. Paul's epistles show the genuine possibility of such seduction:

- 2 Corinthians 11:3 - Paul compares the means by which the serpent in Eden was able to muddle Eve's mind enough that, despite the grandeur of the Garden, and the personal contact with Yahweh, she chose to disobey for the sake of personal pleasure. The "false apostles" in Corinth were preaching a different "gospel" with a different "Jesus" to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:4), the influence of which, if believed, would make a way for a "different spirit" instead of the Holy Spirit finding priority in their minds, leading them to turn away from that sincere devotion of Christ.⁷¹
- Ephesians 5:6-7 - Paul warns against the very real possibility of being deceived by false teachers, who were not teaching the truth. Believers are warned against becoming a "partner" (*symmetochos*, from *metechō*, "to share"⁷²) and thus be drawn away from singular devotion to Christ. This possible partnership is "wherein the bodies are not simply close but inseparable."⁷³ A person can be a partner only with one "side"; either there is partnership with Christ or there is partnership with evil. This is no hypothetical warning; it is a strong caution against allowing one's necessary singular devotion to Christ be waylaid by a different devotion to other than Christ.
- Colossians 2:4 - if it were impossible for anyone who was saved to be deceived away from relationship with Christ, then Paul had no compelling reason to give such a strong warning. Ralph Martin's transliteration of the Greek text is

⁷¹ Stanley M. Horton, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Springfield, MO: Logion, 1999), 236.

⁷² The root *echō* "is an expression for possession and relationship". See *NIDNTT*, I:637-639.

⁷³ Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012), 133.

“nobody is to talk you into error”.⁷⁴ While this is not a *de facto* pointer to eventual apostasy, it is a definite statement about the existence of a genuine possibility that someone who was “in Christ” could be persuaded away from Him, choosing other than Him.

- Colossians 2:8 — to “take captive” is from *sulagōgen*, “to kidnap to capture, to carry off as a captive or prize of war.”⁷⁵ The two forces working against Christian belief are *philosophy and empty deceit* which is *according to human tradition* (ESV) (which could point to a deceptive rhetoric or argumentation from a non-Christian source) and *the elemental spirits of the world*, something less than the Creator because those elements are things (or persons) which themselves have been created.⁷⁶ There is no scholarly consensus as to the precise meaning of “elemental spirits” (*stoicheion* from *stoichea*).⁷⁷ Whatever they may be, Paul warns against the very real possibility someone who was truly saved might choose to listen to something other than the voice of God. And that choice be made “captive” (*sylogōgeō*, “to carry off as booty”⁷⁸) — to fall into apostasy.

The third passage, from 2 Peter 1:10, is an instruction to believers to “make their calling and election sure”, or as James Moffatt wrote, “Ratify or attest by a full, consistent life your calling and election (a hendiadys).” He argued that a Christian, by indifference and (spiritual) carelessness, might “slip” and therefore “collapse on the road to the eternal realm; it is a fall

⁷⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (NCBC) (London, UK: Oliphants, 1974), 76.

⁷⁵ Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 79.

⁷⁶ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Paideia) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 211. (Emphasis original.)

⁷⁷ To what Paul was specifically referring is a continuing matter of debate; many scholars understand these “elements” as angels and demons, forces personified within Gnosticism. What they mean is irrelevant since Christ has overcome them. See *NIDNTT* II:452-453.

⁷⁸ *NIDNTT*, III:379.

into deadly sin.”⁷⁹

If we revisit the definition of apostasy given previously (apostasy, in a simple sense, is *turning away* from God to *turn towards* something that is not Him), and understand free will as a genuine part of the human condition as sovereignly created by God, it is indeed a bona fide possibility that someone once saved could, through, as Moffatt noted, carelessness and indifference, “collapse” in the Christian journey, fail to reach the heavenly goal, not be an overcomer, and have no one to blame for it but one’s own self.

NT thinking on apostasy. Several of the reasons for falling into apostasy have already been discussed; here I will discuss some NT texts showing the possibility of apostasy.

The parable of the sower (soils). Matthew 13:3-8 is what is commonly known as the parable of the sower, although accuracy would have it better titled as either the parable of the seed or the parable of the soils. The “seed” is the Word of God or the Gospel message. The various types of soil are representative of typical conditions of the human heart or soul.

Of the four soils represented, only two consider the possibility of apostasy. The first soil, which is the hard path, representing those persons who never respond to the Gospel, and the fourth soil, which is the good ground, the antithesis of the path, provides an abundant yield.

Of the people represented by the hard path, it can be said:

- They cannot be apostate for they have never experienced relationship with Christ.
- Such do not understand (*sunīēmi*, “to perceive” or “to

⁷⁹ James Moffatt, *The General Epistles: James, Peter and Judas* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), 183.

comprehend”⁸⁰) why they hear, and before they might (eventually) comprehend it, what has been sown is “snatched away” by the devil.

- “The hard, pathway soil represents the individual whose mind is closed. He shuts his eyes and refuses to look, he stops his ears and will not listen.”⁸¹

The people represented by the rocky soil:

- Represent underdeveloped faith that has no strong rooting in the Word.
- Perish under the pressure of outside forces.

According to the Bible, Jesus was aware that some of his followers would not last, but fall away. He compared his message and audience with seed and a farmer’s field: if one’s faith does not have “roots,” the seed will not grow and will “fall away,” but “those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop....”⁸²

Those who are represented by the thorny soil:

- hear the Word (cf. Mark 4:18), but that reception is choked out by the “worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth” (Matthew 13:22).
- Give in to outward pressures which in this case are life’s pleasures.

It could be argued in both the example of the rocky soil and the thorny soil that their “faith” was outward, not inward, one

⁸⁰ *NIDNTT*, III:130.

⁸¹ Neil R. Lightfoot, *Lessons from the Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1965), 23.

⁸² Mantsinen and Tervo-Niemelä, “Leaving Christianity”, 74.

based on enthusiasm instead of commitment.⁸³ If so, their failure to persevere would not legitimately be apostasy, as there would be a question as to whether they had actually been saved.

But the language Jesus uses indicates a growth had begun; it was shallow but nonetheless it as a growth, which then failed because of a lack of root and a lack of spiritual moisture.⁸⁴ Allowing times of trouble and/or persecution to shape one's decision would then be classified as giving in to apostasy. "Fall away" is from *skandalizō*; as a passive verb it means "to fall away, take offense, be misled". It can also refer to being allowed to go astray.⁸⁵ In the process of being "scandalized" by persecution and trouble, they forsake the immature aspects of their thin faith and become apostate. The infantile faith is overrun by the offense, and the believer chooses to give in to the scandalizing force instead of remaining firm in Christ.

From this section we see that the possibility of men being led away from Jesus is present in His teaching. It is true that the expressions used are sometimes hypothetical, but this is not always the case. The possibility is a real one. Further, those who are in danger are described as believers, and there is nothing in the context to determine if their faith was real or not.⁸⁶

The outside forces faced by the people in both the rocky and the thorny soils cannot of their own power separate anyone from Christ (Romans 8:35-39). Their apostasy comes when they choose to allow those pressures to be, in their minds, greater than God. The people of the rocky and of the thorny soil deliberately chose to capitulate to outside pressure. The key to perseverance is not a previous divine eternal decree, but

⁸³ Lightfoot, *Lessons from the Parables*, 23.

⁸⁴ George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York, NY: Richard A. Smith, 1935), 45.

⁸⁵ *NIDNTT*, II:708.

⁸⁶ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 70.

choosing to “fix” one’s eyes (one’s thoughts) on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Disobedience. Disobedience is another motivator for apostasy. No person is able to serve two masters (Luke 6:13); whomever one obeys is one’s master. When the mind is allowed to remain focused on something other than God, disobedience results because that is the nature of the unaided flesh (cf. Romans 8:7-8). Those who walk or live in obedience to God will not surrender to the proclivities of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).

“(S)in will not be their master (Romans 6: 14); by the help of the Spirit they can ‘put to death the misdeeds of the body’ (Romans 8:12-13). This conflict between Spirit and flesh is ultimately about eternal life or death. Walking ‘according to the flesh’ leads to death, walking ‘according to the Spirit’ leads to life (Romans 6:21-22; 7:5; 8:6, 12-13; Galatians 6:8).”⁸⁷

Disobedience brings apostasy (and loss of salvation) through “failing the test” (1 Corinthians 9:27).

...if he gave in to the desires of his body, instead of living by the power of the Spirit, (eternal) death would be the consequence.⁸⁸

Paul’s statement in Romans 8:13 expresses two conditionals: *if* “you” (meaning believers) live according to the sinful nature, the end result is death, but *if* “you” (again, believers) “put to death” the “misdeeds of the body” (*praxis tou sōmatos*), , life is the result. Romans 8:12 makes it clear that those in Christ no longer are obligated (be a “debtor”) to the sinful flesh. Paul recognizes believers can choose to live according to the sinful nature, but to do so, to fail to “put to death” that which is of the earthly (sinful) nature (Colossians 3:5), the end result will not

⁸⁷ Christian Stettler, “Paul, the Law and Judgement by Works”, *EvQ* 76.3 (July-September 2004), 197.

⁸⁸ Stettler, “Paul, the Law and Judgement by Works”, 197.

be life but death.⁸⁹

Colossians 3:5-6 begins with an imperative: all believers are expected to “kill off” sinful behaviors that once ruled their lives (verse 7), for God’s wrath is coming against such behaviors. Paul’s instruction from verse 9b-17 is strongly positive, about the benefits of being a believer, and how the life of the believer is meant to manifest (i.e., compassion, kindness, humility, forgiveness, the unity of love). To sow to the sinful flesh — to turn away from the commands of God for holy living — is to reap “destruction” (Galatians 6:8).

If obedience is commanded, then disobedience must be possible — and not hypothetical. To allow for a genuine free will, there must be the possibility that free will may choose other than obedience to God; therefore, Paul frames Colossians 3:5-8 as imperative, to impress upon the believer the absolute necessity of conforming to the will of God through grace and by faith instead of turning back to the sinful flesh. Instead of disobedience, a believer in Christ must persevere in the faith; “assurance of our present and future salvation is by continued faith in Christ.”⁹⁰

Drift. Hebrews 2:1, the first of the warning passages, cautions strongly against spiritual *drift*. The writer exhorts to pay very careful attention to that which has been heard (i.e., the Gospel) so that by failing to pay attention one does not begin drifting from Christ on the path to apostasy. The word for “drift” (from *pararreō*) speaks of “being carried past and so lose” one’s salvation.⁹¹ Drift is neglect of God’s means of grace, which from Hebrews 1 includes the Son as the voice of God to people

⁸⁹ Frank J. Matera, *Romans* (Paideia) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 196.

⁹⁰ Roy Ingle, “Keeps on Keeping”, *Society of Evangelical Arminians* (<https://evangelicalarminians.org/roy-ingle-keeps-on-keeping/>, November 19, 2024), accessed February 9, 2026.

⁹¹ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC) (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 17.

(Hebrews 1:1) and as the mediator of the new covenant, as well as the angels who are divinely appointed “ministering spirits” for the sake of the redeemed (Hebrews 1:14). The exhortation to “pay more careful attention” to that which has already been heard is a warning in and of itself; any “success” in living as a Christian depends on heeding the means of grace as opposed to choosing one’s own way (Proverbs 14:12, par. Proverbs 16:25).

The material immediately preceding Hebrews 2:1 declared the preeminence of Christ; it is perhaps one of the most important and noble Christologies to be found in the NT. Given the exalted place which Jesus as the Son occupies, decision is demanded; “refers must change their lives accordingly.”⁹² They cannot, in any way, allow themselves to “drift” from the truth in Hebrews 1: they must purposefully “pay the most careful attention” to all that has been heard (about Christ) so that at no time is there any departure from the glorious truth about Jesus as Lord.⁹³

It is vital to note the warning of Hebrews 2:1 specifically lays the responsibility for paying attention to the Gospel message on the individual Christian.⁹⁴ The same thought, of the believer’s personal responsibility against drift, is expressed in 1 John 3:7 — “*Do not let anyone lead you astray*” into what would be “seduction into error of a grave kind.”⁹⁵ That John would warn about being so led astray indicates the possibility was in fact genuine. There is no evidence here of Hebrews 2:1 being an

⁹² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 36-37 — “It is necessary, therefore’ expresses a logical imperative: from the fact that Christ is greater than the angels it follows logically that the revelation delivered through the Son must be regarded with the utmost seriousness.”

⁹³ Grant R. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews”, *Grace Unlimited*, 146.

⁹⁴ Götthlieb Lünemann, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (tr. Maurice J. Evans)(Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1882), 101 — “...a warning reference to the great responsibility and culpability in the case of its neglect.”

⁹⁵ Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1892), 125.

hypothetical statement; if it were, then as a warning, it would be meaningless. If it was impossible for someone who was genuinely saved to drift away from salvation through indifference to the Gospel message, then the warning - the whole verse, and the exhortation following has no significance whatsoever. It is difficult to understand how the author's flow of thought could go from a majestic truth about Christ only to then devolve into a hypothetical that is meaningless. The simple possibility of the danger of drifting away from what was heard necessitates the warning — which excludes any thought of a hypothetical situation.⁹⁶ Since apostasy is a possibility, if a person who has embraced Christ could through a chosen indifference be carried past and thus lose salvation, then the warning is absolutely vital.⁹⁷

Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. No consensus exists for the precise meaning of “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” in evangelical theology. Though it appears in the NT only in the Synoptics (Matthew 12:31, Mark 3:28-29, Luke 12:10), it is not a minor aspect of Biblical teaching.

Janus Kręcidło's 2026 study⁹⁸ explored several of the ways in which the term has been understood since the time of Christ:

- The *Didache* (a 2nd century text, also called “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”) connected the blasphemy of or against the Holy Spirit to someone who abused a prophet speaking by the Spirit, which made it

⁹⁶ Lenski, *Hebrews*, 64, draws attention to Ephesians 4:14 - “carried about with every wind of doctrine” as a parallel thought to the warning about drift in Hebrews 2:1.

⁹⁷ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1960), V:345 — “Here the metaphor is that ‘of being swept along past the sure anchorage which is within reach’ (Westcott), a vivid picture of peril for all (‘we,’ *hēmas*).”

⁹⁸ Janus Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit and Why is it Unforgivable? (Mark 3:28-30 and Parallels)?, *The Biblical Annals* 16.1 (2026).

an unforgivable sin.⁹⁹ The early church father Irenaeus held to the same view, expanding it to include any heretical teaching on the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁰

- Origen, a late 2nd century Christian writer, took the position that the sin of blasphemy against the Spirit could only be committed by those who had been baptized.¹⁰¹
- Augustine, bishop of Hippo (4th century) interpreted blasphemy against the Spirit as those who “persist until the end of their earthly life in rejecting the salvation offered by Christ blaspheme against the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰²
- Several voices within evangelicalism have argued for such blasphemy as apostasy, “understood as abandoning the Christian faith.”¹⁰³

Peter H. Davids understands blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as “the willful and conscious rejection of God’s activity and its attribution to the devil.” Further, he noted, “It stands as a severe warning to those who know God’s truth not to turn from it or abandon their faith.”¹⁰⁴ Francis Pieper argued the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit “is the willful and determined suppression of the inner conviction wrought by the Holy Ghost.”¹⁰⁵

Julius Müller’s position on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is set in a slightly broader sense.

⁹⁹ Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy?”, 70.

¹⁰⁰ Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy?”, 70.

¹⁰¹ Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy?”, 71.

¹⁰² Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy?”, 72

¹⁰³ Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy?”, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Peter H. Davids, “Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit”, *EDT*, 161, 162.

¹⁰⁵ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1950), I:573.

We cannot, therefore, give up the main features of the old theory concerning the sin against the Holy Ghost. Its essence is HATRED of whatever is known to be divine and godlike. ...

The decisiveness of the opposition consists in the fact that the man is fully conscious of it, and deliberately persists in it. Self alone will reign, but there are obligations to truth which stand in its way; it therefore endeavours, if possible, wholly to destroy the truth, and fights to the uttermost against its power.¹⁰⁶

Müller, connecting Hebrews 6:3-6 and 10:26-31 to his discussion of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, argues the people in mind were those “who had by generation become partakers of Christ’s redemption.”¹⁰⁷

Kręcidło expanded on his views on blasphemy of the Spirit:

The majority of interpreters believe that the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the deliberate mislabelling of good as evil. It involves the intentional and malicious rejection of good, viewing good as evil and evil as good. This sin destroys a person’s ability to distinguish between good and evil, thereby precluding repentance and conversion. For this reason, it is a sin that cannot be forgiven.¹⁰⁸

H. B. Swete several years ago argued in the same basic vein:

The man who was capable of calling good evil, of painting the Source of holiness in the colours (*sic*) of

¹⁰⁶ Julius Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin* (tr. William Urwick) (London, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1878), II:422. (Emphasis original.)

¹⁰⁷ Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, II:423.

¹⁰⁸ Kręcidło, “What is the Sin of Blasphemy?”, 75.

Hell, was beyond repentance and therefore beyond forgiveness.¹⁰⁹

It could be argued at this point that nothing is specifically said about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit connecting to apostasy; the context of the material in the Synoptics and the understanding of many NT scholars seems to extend this sin only to those who have never believed. However, Hebrews 10:26-31, one of the warnings against apostasy, identifies divine punishment coming to someone who has “treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace.” Notice the writer described the person of the warning as having been *sanctified*. To be sanctified is to be made holy; “it speaks of a relationship with God.”¹¹⁰ Within conservative evangelical circles, sanctification is typically understood as being both a conformity to the life and character of Christ (the Godward side) and the “crisis” of whole-hearted surrender to God through a decision for holiness (the man-ward side) as defined in the Scripture.¹¹¹ Thus, it should be concluded Hebrews 10:29 speaks of a person who had come to a genuine knowledge of Christ in salvation. To then turn away from that sanctification, to choose to return to the world and its ways, and to “insult” (*enubrizō* - “to insult” or “to outrage”)¹¹² the working of the Spirit by making that choice (which by any metric is blaspheming the Spirit), is to become apostate as well as moving by choice beyond the offer of forgiveness and restoration (Mark 3:29).

The beginning of Hebrews 10:26 (“if we go on sinning deliberately” [ESV]; “deliberately keep on sinning” [NIV]; “willfully sinning” [YLT]) can be understood as “sin voluntarily” (*hekousiōs gar hamartanontōn*). The verbal aspect is present

¹⁰⁹ H. B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1964), 117.

¹¹⁰ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 281.

¹¹¹ Miles Taber, “Christ -The Method and the Motive”, *GJ* 3.1 (Winter 1962), 20.

¹¹² This is the only use of the word in the NT.

tense, indicating an action which is on-going as well as habitual. This willful sin is the “self-chosen sin of continual apostasy.”¹¹³

As noted above, no consensus exists as to the precise offense described as “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.” My own position is the sin of blasphemy of the Spirit has to do with salvation; the person who adamantly refuses salvation in Christ, or who “shrinks back” from that relationship (cf. Hebrews 10:39), either way, will blaspheme the Holy Spirit in resisting His convicting work (cf. John 16:7-9 ESV). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only sin in the NT which is specifically described as without forgiveness (Mark 3:28-29). There is no forgiveness for this sin for two reasons:

- Those who blaspheme the Spirit in this life have become apostate and allow their hearts/souls to become hardened have no inclination to repent. As Pieper noted: “He that falls away from faith does so through his own fault; the cause of apostasy in every case is rejection of God’s Word and resistance to the operation of the Holy Spirit in the Word.”¹¹⁴
- Those who die unregenerate, having resisted the conviction of the Spirit in their lives, having no salvific relationship in and through Christ, die in a permanent state of sin and rebellion, permanently and eternally in an unforgiven state.

Apostasy, forgiveness and restoration. An early Christian writing, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, stated salvation was impossible if a person intended to deny Christ; however, if that person had a change of heart and sought forgiveness, then

¹¹³ Lawrence R. Farley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013), 80.

¹¹⁴ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III:89.

forgiveness was possible.¹¹⁵

Whether apostasy could be forgiven was an issue in the early days of the Church. People who claimed to be saved, who caved to demands from Imperial Rome to swear to the emperor (which meant denying their faith in Christ), subsequently had a change of heart and sought to be forgiven and restored. Cyprian (200-258 AD), bishop of Carthage, documented instances of those who had chosen to turn back from their faith experiencing immediate, divinely-administered punishment for their sin. Of course, he advocated strongly for remaining faithful, even in times of persecution, but he understood the strength of God's grace and forgiveness.

Therefore my brethren I beseech you each one to confess his faults while he is yet on earth, while the confession is yet open to him and the atonement and remission which is in the hands of his priests is still valid in the eyes of the Lord. Let us turn to God with our whole minds and with unfeigned grief express our repentance and ask pity of God. For it is to God that the soul must bow, to God shall your tears be pleasing and on Him all your hope shall rest. He Himself tells us how we ought to pray : "*Return ye to me with all your heart,*" saith the Lord, "*and with fasting and with weeping and with mourning. And rend your heart and not your garments.*" Let us return to the Lord with our whole heart, and by fasting and weeping and mourning, as He bids us Himself, let us appease His wrath."¹¹⁶

The persecution under the Roman emperor Decius Trajan (249-

¹¹⁵ Hermas, "The Shepherd (Parables 26.6)", *Apostolic Fathers* (LCL) (English tr. by Kirsopp Lake) (London, UK: William Heinemann and New York, NY: G. P. Putnam, 1930), II:283.

¹¹⁶ Cyprian, "The Lapsed", *Fathers of the Church: A Selection from the Writings of the Latin Fathers* (tr. F. A. Wright) (London, UK: Routledge, 1928), 137. (*italics original*).

251 AD) employed various threats and punishments with the specific design of moving Christians to apostasize from their faith. A large number of “nominal Christians” chose to give sacrifice to the (pagan) gods, or “procured, from the magistrate, a false certificate that they had done so, only then to be “excommunicated as apostates.”¹¹⁷ Those who chose apostasy over perseverance in the faith were typically excommunicated and “in many churches, through excessive rigor, were even refused restoration.”¹¹⁸

Whereas the early church often refused to grant forgiveness to those who had apostatized to escape persecution,¹¹⁹ it is probable Schaff’s words, about “excessive rigor”, describe an overzealousness to somehow “protect” the Church from apostatizing influences. The OT, particularly Ezekiel 18, gives a strong call to repent from all sin, be forgiven, and not perish because of a cherished sin. The burden of change is on the individual; Yahweh calls on people to both *turn from* (LXX - *apostrephō*)¹²⁰ (see v. 21) and *throw away* (LXX - *aporriptō*)¹²¹ (or, “cast away”¹²² (see v. 31). The divine call is to turn back from apostasy through genuine repentance, “so that sin will not be your downfall” (Ezekiel 18:30). Yahweh has no desire for any who are in sin to obstinately remain in that sin, that apostasy of willful disobedience, and end up dying in their sin.

Human responsibility for their present situation, ‘dying’, is affirmed by the Lord with v. 32’s variant of v. 23 (cf.

¹¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics, 1882), II:42.

¹¹⁸ Schaff, *History*, 51.

¹¹⁹ Apostasy was considered a capital sin, as was blasphemy, adultery or murder. The early church held, based on Hebrews 6:1-6, that those sins moved the (former) believer away from redemption. See T. A. Noble, “Repentance”, *NDT*, 764.

¹²⁰ “To turn from, coming back from” (Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* [rev. ed] [Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2009], 85).

¹²¹ “To throw out (as useless)” (Muraoka, *Lexicon*, 81).

¹²² *The Septuagint* (with an English translation by Lancelot L. Brenton) (London, UK: Samuel Bagster, n.d.), 1001.

‘death of the lawless’), but they are not yet ‘dead’: the ‘death of the dying’ is not what Lord ‘desires’.¹²³

The general view in the OT is that no act of perceived apostasy against the Lord is intractably without remedy. Ezekiel 18 clearly shows Yahweh’s desire for apostates to turn from their sin, whatever it might be, and return to the Lord, who presents Himself as gracious (cf. Exodus 34:6, Psalm 67:1, 116:5, Isaiah 30:18).

Repentance (*metanoia*) is a “change of mind” or a “change of will”.¹²⁴ No one who is steeped in apostasy is able, on their own, to have the requisite change of mind or will to rightly repent before God. Since He does not desire that any should perish but instead come to a place of repentance (2 Peter 3:9), He provides His grace and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:7-9 ESV) to enable the sin-deadened mind to awaken to the need for repentance.

Some argue apostasy, in the NT economy, is not necessarily permanent, a decision with no possible change.¹²⁵ God grants conviction of sin through the Spirit via prevenient grace¹²⁶ which is accompanied by a godly (i.e., stimulated by the goodness of God expressed in the provision of grace) sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10). It is supposed as possible for someone who has chosen apostasy to, at some future time, to respond to the

¹²³ John W. Olley, *Ezekiel: A Commentary Based on Iezekiël in Codex Vaticanus* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2009), 354.

¹²⁴ Lewis Bookwalter, *Repentance* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren, 1902), 17.

¹²⁵ James Moffatt, “Jesus Upon Stumbling Blocks”, *ExpT* 26.9 (June 1915), 409fn5: “In Mt. 24 10, where Dan. 11:41 is quoted-though there is no allusion to temptation in the O. T. - passage-ruin or final apostasy is meant, and this sense is never far from most of the references of Jesus. But the term did not necessarily involve an irretrievable relapse, as we can see from Paul and Hermas (Vis. iv. I. 3: ‘I ask the Lord...to grant repentance to his servants’).”

¹²⁶ Picirilli prefers “pre-regenerating grace”, which he understands as (1) being entirely through God’s work in the individual, (2) making faith possible without making it coercive, and (3) reversing the bondage caused by sin (*Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 156-157).

convicting power of the Holy Spirit and return to an active, confessional faith.

Some Arminian authors, however, do not believe someone who chooses apostasy can ever be restored. Forlines, for example, arguing from Hebrews 6:4-6, insists the text leaves no room for restoration: such a person “cannot be restored to faith; he cannot be saved again.”¹²⁷ Marshall, also commenting on Hebrews 6:4-6, believes those who fall into apostasy do so with a “total renunciation of the faith”, because in their apostasy they are again crucifying Christ, subjecting Him to additional shame.¹²⁸ Picirilli’s discussion leads him to conclude: “Hebrews 6:4-6 and the entire book seem too clear to dispute: personal apostasy from a truly regenerate condition really is possible and recovery from it is impossible.”¹²⁹ It would be reasonable to agree with Marshall, that “only those who hold fast to the end will inherit the promises of God.”¹³⁰

The writer of Hebrews believes a Christian is “able to commit such an act” of turning away from God, and be outside forgiveness “if persisting in that attitude.”¹³¹ Despite this, there is nothing in Hebrews which allows for a determination whether a person had actually turned away from God and gone beyond the pale of forgiveness and restoration: “It was enough to warn against a danger sufficiently dreadful for his readers to flee from it without inquiring how near they might come to it and escape unscathed.”¹³²

From an OT perspective, was Israel’s turning away from Yahweh, disobeying Him, going after pagan idol worship, and the like, genuine acts of apostasy? Was Israel actually apostate

¹²⁷ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 319.

¹²⁸ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 144.

¹²⁹ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 228.

¹³⁰ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 138.

¹³¹ B. J. Oropeza, “The Warning Passages in Hebrews: Revised Theologies and New Methods of Interpretation”, *CBR* 10 (2011), 88.

¹³² Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 151-152.

or were they nearing that point in their being steeped in sin, without crossing the line, what some might refer to as “backsliding”?¹³³ And if their rebellious acts and disobedience could be classified as apostatizing, is it a different understanding and application than how apostasy is portrayed in the NT?

I would suggest apostasy in the OT is treated differently than in the NT. God’s calls to Israel to return to Him were based on His covenant with them, a covenant which was stringently conditional. “If” the people obeyed, then blessing would come; but “if” they did not, judgment would replace blessing (see e.g. Deuteronomy 28, 1 Kings 8:33, 8:48, Nehemiah 9:29). And, as we have seen, God makes repeated pleas to His people to turn away from their sin and return to Him (e.g., Ezekiel 33:11).

In the NT, the old covenant has been replaced by a new covenant effected through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 8:1-13). There is a necessary finality in the work of Christ; everything necessary to fulfill all God intended for His creation was accomplished through Christ’s passion. Apostasy, for the individual who chooses to step away, negates in that person all Christ did to achieve that salvation. If the wonder and glory of salvation and all the elements of grace were not enough to keep (satisfy) a person “in Christ” initially, then

¹³³ “Backsliding” is a “temporary lapse into unbelief and sin following spiritual conversion.” The word is not found in the NT; by their action some could be described as having “backslidden”, such as Peter (Matthew 26:69-75) and Demas (2 Timothy 4:10). Reformed authors will argue that backsliding is not a means of causing a believer to end up eternally lost, that “the life Christ gives is eternal (John 3:16, 10:28) guarantee the final salvation of every blood-bought child of God” (Bruce Demarest, “Backsliding”, *EDT*, 111). In my view, however, since “backsliding” is not specifically mentioned in the NT, to attempt to define NT examples by the term is not the best move. Peter’s issues when Jesus was arrested, His denial of the Lord, perhaps is better understood as him surrendering to what Paul later described in Romans 7:19-20 — the effect of the sinful nature even in the saved. Demas “loved this world” — he chose the way of the world instead of maintaining faith in Jesus. There is no mention of him ever returning to Paul or even to faith; it could be argued he chose apostasy over continuing in his faith.

there is nothing “additional” which might draw that person back. If such is the case, then texts such as 2 Peter 3:9 and John 16:7-9 have no reference to apostates but to never-saved persons who need salvation in Christ lest they perish eternally in their sin.

Those who have become satisfied with their disengagement from their (usually) childhood faith are less likely to respond to the Spirit’s conviction. Bruce Hunsberger’s research on apostates demonstrated:

- Most choose apostasy between the ages of 12 and 18;
- The actual disengagement process covered anywhere to a “few months” to a year or more;
- Of those in Hunsberger’s survey, 84% reported it was from not likely to slightly likely they would return to church;
- The majority of those who embraced apostasy exhibited a very low sense of being “religious”.¹³⁴

Those who choose to ignore the conviction of the Spirit develop a hardness of heart¹³⁵ which will deliberately ignore whatever conviction is provided. Having a hardened heart makes it highly unlikely they will ever respond to the Holy Spirit, making it certain they will eternally perish because of their choice to be an apostate. Reflecting on Paul’s discussion in Ephesians 4, Max Turner points to verse 18, where the Gentiles who do not know God, who are separated from His divine life because of their “hardening of their hearts”, have chosen to indulge in

¹³⁴ Bruce Hunsberger, “A Reexamination of the Antecedents of Apostasy”, *RRR* 21:2 (Spring, 1980), 31.

¹³⁵ Exodus mentions Pharaoh choosing to “harden his heart” against the Lord, refusing to manumit the Jewish people (e.g., Exodus 8:15). Pharaoh’s hardening of his heart came because of his haughtiness and his self-reliant boldness (see Martyn Summerbell, “Hardening Pharaoh’s Heart”, *The Hebrew Student* 1.2 (May, 1882), 9.

worldly pleasures rather than the grace-ordered life (verse 19).¹³⁶ The same must be said of apostates; they are, by their choice, separated from the life which is in God, and find more pleasure in worldly pursuits than in the pursuit of relationship with their Creator and Savior.

It is clear, apparently, that in the NT economy, those who fail by their free-will choice to remain in Christ, feeding their spiritual self with the study of the Word, prayer, and worship, will fall into intractable apostasy.

Prevention of apostasy. James Arminius, the 17th century Dutch theologian and professor, traditionally recognized as the “father” of Arminian theology, believed man’s free will was truly free, but because of the presence of sin in the human condition, man’s free will was unable to function on its own on anything which was towards God.

In this state, the free will of man towards. the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and [*attenuatum*] weakened; but it is also [*captivatum*] imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace. For Christ has said, “*Without me ye can do nothing.*”¹³⁷

Man’s free will is inclined always to sin unless that inclination is changed through divine grace operating through the Holy Spirit.¹³⁸ Arminius taught that those who are believers cannot “decline” from their salvation; their status as believers means they are within the power of God, remaining among His elect,

¹³⁶ Max Turner, “Approaching ‘Personhood’ in the New Testament, With Special Reference to Ephesians”, *EvQ* 77.3 (July-September 2005), 225.

¹³⁷ Arminius, “Public Disputation XI”, *The Works of James Arminius*, I:526. (Italics original.)

¹³⁸ Arminius, “Public Disputation XI”, I:528.

and will persevere.¹³⁹ Perseverance, then, is for believers who continue in faith, whose minds remain focused on Christ (cf. Hebrews 12:2). The responsibility for continuing in faith is the individual's, through remaining attentive to Christ's words (John 8:31) and by that, remaining attached to the "vine", which is Christ (John 15:4).

Those who believe in the absolute perseverance of the saints, given NT evidence, would affirm that a person regenerated in Christ is so wholly changed that any return to a wholly sinful and unbelieving state should be impossible. Texts such as 2 Corinthians 5:17 seem leave no room for a different view: when a person is "in Christ", meaning "saved", then through divine grace that person is made a "new creation", wholly distinct from the old man steeped in sin, and all that is in any way connected to the old has "passed away".¹⁴⁰ Forlines, however, has argued that while 2 Corinthians 5:17 does speak of having "a new direction in life", a change in attitude that desires to reject sin and embrace Christ, "a basic desire in our heart to do right and be right with God." This change "is a basic change, not an *absolute* change"; it establishes relationship with Christ but "it does not eradicate all traces of sin."¹⁴¹ If there are traces of sin, then there is the possibility of disobedience, of "feeding" the sin instead of heeding the NT calls to do the will of God and to grow in "grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).¹⁴²

Man's free will remains genuinely free; the negative of John 8:31 would be "if you do not remain attentive to My words, then you

¹³⁹ Arminius, "Apology or Defense, Article I & II", I:282.

¹⁴⁰ Paul uses *parēlthen*, "to pass away", which is a aorist active indicative verb. As an aorist indicative, it refers to something occurring in the past without a necessary reference to specific time. "Active" points to the subject performing the action; Christ makes the old pass away in favor of something new.

¹⁴¹ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 295

¹⁴² Colossians 3:5ff is expressed as a command, but a command is only effective if it is obeyed. Failure to "put to death" the things of the flesh means those things will continue to grow and exercise authority in a person's life.

are not my disciples.” John 15:6 is a conditional: a person who fails to remain in Christ (which indicates that person was formerly remaining or abiding in Christ), who by free-will actions has failed to “assimilate” into the faith-community,¹⁴³ will as a consequence of that failure, be removed from the vine — have relationship with Christ ended, which results in apostasy.

All the branches were in the vine: they belonged to it. Some ceased to imbibe the sap from the trunk, ceased to be fruitful, ceased to live; they are cut off from the vine; they are burned in the fire. If this is not total and final apostasy, what is it? and what is total and final apostasy? And if this is not the teaching of the parable, what does it teach? If the disciples to whom the parable was addressed were not liable to become barren and unfruitful, why address the parable to them? If they could not fail to continue in the Saviour's love, why set forth this parable to show the fearful consequences of a failure so to do?¹⁴⁴

Paul's last warning to the Ephesian church is instructive. He prophesied that “from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). “From your own number” indicates individuals who were part of the Ephesian church. If we admit to a genuine free will, then it is begging the question to insist those who might be drawn away were not truly regenerated believers. Compare Paul's warning in Acts to Peter's in 2 Peter 3:17. There, he specifically exhorts:

¹⁴³ J. C. De Smidt, “A Perspective on John 15:1-8”, *Neo* 25.2 (1991), 256.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas O. Summers, *Systematic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Methodist Episcopal Church, 1888), 198.

- “Be on your guard” - the verbal aspect here is an imperative, underlining the gravity of what he will tell his readers.
- “Not be carried away” - from *sunapagō* - “to lead off”, “to condescend”. The idea is being moved from a previous position. Peter tasks his readers with the obligation to “maintain their safe foothold.”¹⁴⁵
- “Error of lawless men”- see 2 Peter 2:7; those who stand outside the bounds of God’s righteousness.
- “Fall from your secure position” - Compare to Jude 24 about “falling” or “slipping”.¹⁴⁶ Simple logic would show that if one falls away from a position, one is no longer in that position.

It is possible for a believer to be deceived by error and end up falling away into apostasy. 2 Peter 3:18 is a preventative to a slide into apostasy; instead of being drawn away by lawless (ungodly) voices, the believer is to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus.”

Earlier in his letter, Peter very plainly describes the possibility of apostasy through returning to the world:

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning (2 Peter 2:20).

Picirilli’s assessment of Peter’s words are important:

- Peter’s labeling of some as “apostates” is supported by:

¹⁴⁵ David Horrell, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (EpC) (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 1998), 187.

¹⁴⁶ Moffatt, *The General Epistles*, 212.

- They had previously “escaped” (*apophugontes*) worldly pollution. The root, *phuegō*, basically means “to flee”. But in Matthew 23:33 it means “to escape”, in this case, the “sentence of hell.”¹⁴⁷ Peter’s language refers to them having been saved.
- Their escape was through their knowing (*epignōsei*) Jesus Christ. “Way of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:21) indicates their “knowing” Christ refers to their salvation. As E. H. Plumptre affirmed: “They had once in the fullest sense of the words ‘known Christ’ as their Lord and Saviour.”¹⁴⁸
- They are “entangled” (*emplakentes* - also “to be trapped”).¹⁴⁹ They have developed relationship with the same sinful state from which they had previously escaped.
- They are worse off than they were before. Peter is probably drawing from Matthew 12:45, paralleling Jesus’ words with the apostates’ experience.¹⁵⁰

Though apostasy is possible, it is not inevitable, neither is it highly probable. Preventing a slide into apostasy is a matter of obedience to the Scriptures — an obedience which keeps one in a place of faith and dependence on Christ. This requisite obedience is not wholly dependent on the individual, either; it is assisted by grace, empowered by the Spirit, and fueled by the truth of the Word of God. Apostasy happens when a believer in Christ, for whatever reason, chooses to find satisfaction in other things, such as the world or the sinful¹⁵¹ flesh, which can

¹⁴⁷ Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary*, 339.

¹⁴⁸ E. H. Plumptre, *The General Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1893), 188.

¹⁴⁹ Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary*, 333.

¹⁵⁰ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith and Free Will*, 230-232.

¹⁵¹ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 296, makes a distinction, based on Numbers 15:27-31, between “sins of ignorance” and “presumptuous

happen through being deceived (Romans 16:18, 2 Corinthians 11:3).

Colossians 1:21-23 expresses a conditional situation:

- Christ through His finished work on the cross made it possible for man to be reconciled with God.¹⁵²
- God through Christ makes believers holy and “without blemish and free from accusation”. Whatever in the human condition which would have been fodder for the “accuser of the brethren” (Revelation 12:10) has been “cleared out” through relationship with Christ.
- The requirement upon believers is two fold: (1) continue in your faith,¹⁵³ and (2) be not moved from the hope which is in the Gospel. This, again, is a free-will choice to remain focused on Jesus instead of giving any either to

sins.” The “sins of ignorance”, owing to the weakness of the flesh, are probably in focus in 1 John 1:9 and 2:1. Deliberate, presumptuous sin, wherein the choice is made to ignore what one knows to be right (James 4:17), reflects 1 John 3:6; those who ensure what they heard in the beginning will remain in the Son and the Father (1 John 2:24), but those who choose to fail to keep what they heard in the beginning will be those who gravitate back to the sin they had previously left. To stay focused on Jesus is to look away from opportunities to sin. To become unfocused on Jesus is to look *towards* opportunities to sin.

¹⁵² Glen Shellrude, “All Are Elect, Few Are Elect: Understanding New Testament Election Language”, *SBET* 30.2 (Autumn 2012), 149n13, writes: “In Colossians 1:23 Paul says to the Colossian believers that ‘he has reconciled you’. This follows on the statement in 2:20 that God’s purpose in Christ was ‘to reconcile all things to himself’ (also 2 Cor. 5:19: ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ’). The assumption is that the potential is there for ‘all to be reconciled’. However one only becomes ‘one of the reconciled’ when there is a response to the Gospel.”

¹⁵³ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1884), 92: “Continuance in the faith is essential to salvation : loss of faith would be forfeiture of life. The blessings of Christianity are given without interruption only to continuous belief.”

the sinful flesh or to deceptive voices seeking to create spiritual ruination.¹⁵⁴

Eadie's observation here is helpful:

Thus a life of faith is one of hope, and leads to glory. This belief has a conservative power; for it keeps in a justified state, and it secures augmenting holiness. While, therefore, the perseverance of the saints is a prominent doctrine of Scripture, and a perennial source of consolation, it is inconsistent with exhortations to permanence of faith, and notwarnings of the sad results of deviation and apostasy. He who stops short in the race, and does not reach the goal, cannot obtain the prize. He who abandons the refuge into which he fled for a season, is swept away when the hurricane breaks upon him. The loss of faith is the knell of hope.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), 161-162, interprets the Greek text of Colossians 1:22-23 thusly: "*He will present you a living sacrifice, an acceptable offering unto Himself, free from blemish and free even from censure, that ye may stand the piercing glance of Him whose scrutiny no defect can escape. But this can only be, if ye remain true to your old allegiance, if ye hold fast (as I trust ye are holding fast) by the teaching of Epaphras, if the edifice of your faith is built on solid foundations and not reared carelessly on the sands, if ye suffer not yourselves to be shifted or shaken but rest firmly on the hope which ye have found in the Gospel—the one universal unchangeable Gospel...*". Lightfoot seems to understand the Colossian believers' fidelity to be dependent on their obedience to the Gospel, conditioned by the use of "if"—"if" they do those things which keep them living by faith in grace. Contrast to Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 191, who apparently prefers a Calvinistic view over the plain reading of the text. He writes: "This will be accomplished if the Colossians continue in their faith (*they will*) and do not shift from the hope of the gospel (*they won't*)" (emphasis added). The conditional "if" Talbert reduces to a hypothetical.

¹⁵⁵ Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 83.

John 15 speaks of “abiding” (ESV) or “remaining” (NIV) (*meinate*, from *menō*¹⁵⁶); 1 John 2:22-24 explains what Jesus meant by *abiding* or *remaining* in Him. The condition of remaining “in Christ” is to remain or abide in the “true doctrine of Christ”, the message which was given “in the beginning”.¹⁵⁷ This is further reinforced in 2 John 9, where the person “who does not believe in the true doctrine of Christ is not saved.”¹⁵⁸ Salvation came through grace by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), and it is through faith in Christ that salvation is maintained. A maintained salvation is one that is “rooted and grounded” in Christ (Ephesians 3:17), aided by His effectual working in every believer (Ephesians 3:20). Preventing apostasy is not, colloquially speaking, “rocket science”, it is a matter of staying focused on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2), growing in grace (2 Peter 3:18), and continuing in the faith (Colossians 1:23).

Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 2:12 is instructive. The apostle’s intent here is to connect to Philippians 2:4, that every believer, instead of becoming inwardly focused, should, as did Christ, care for others, to learn that greatness in the Kingdom is found in servanthood (Mark 9:35). Being wholly dedicated to emulating Christ’s example of servanthood builds a sympathy with the needs of others¹⁵⁹ and magnifies the presence of the Spirit’s influence within. It is a matter of learning what it is to live “in Christ.”¹⁶⁰

Paul...did not regard grace as operating in such a mechanical fashion that the believer is inevitably carried on to perfection with no effort on his part.

¹⁵⁶ NIDNTT, III:226 -- “Such an abiding in Christ makes a man Christ’s property down to the very depths of his being.”

¹⁵⁷ Cf. 1 John 2:7.

¹⁵⁸ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, 332.

¹⁵⁹ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (London, UK and Glasgow, Scotland: Richard Griffin & Co., 1859), 133.

¹⁶⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians* (NCBC) (London, UK: Oliphants/Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1976), 102.

The paradox of grace and freewill is not to be solved by emphasizing the former to the exclusion of the latter. While Paul certainly anticipated the final perseverance of the vast majority of his converts, he never regarded this perseverance as some predetermined and inevitable; always there pressed upon him ‘the care of all the churches’, a care which involved him in constant prayer and effort lest any member should fall away and so cause him to have run his course in vain.

While, therefore, the believer who commits himself to the grace of God must rightly beware lest he fall away, he can at the same time rest assured that nothing can separate him from the love of God and can rejoice in the hope of final salvation.¹⁶¹

Abbreviations

General

ed.	edition, editor, edited by
n.d.	no date
rev. ed.	revised edition
tr.	translator, translated (by)
vs., vss.	verse, verses

Bible Versions

ESV	English Standard Version
LXX	Septuagint
NIV	New International Version

Books (Commentaries, Dictionaries)

EDT	Evangelical Dictionary of Theology
ICC	International Critical Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NDT	New Dictionary of Theology
NIDNTT	New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

¹⁶¹ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 125.

Journals

<i>BibSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ExpT	<i>Expository Times</i>
GJ	<i>Grace Journal</i>
GTJ	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
IdS	<i>In die Skriflig</i>
JBTM	<i>Journal of Baptist Theology and Ministry</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
Neo	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
RRR	<i>Review of Religious Research</i>
SBET	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>

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