

# ASSURANCE AND APOSTASY

## WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

Apostasy means to "stand away" or to "withdraw;" to desert totally one's religion, beliefs or convictions. With regard to the Christian faith, it raises the question, Can I lose my salvation? Some, answering negatively, insist that it is impossible for a person to lose his salvation, his standing as a child of God. The Evangelical Congregational Church, however, has held over the years that apostasy or departing from God and from faith in Christ is a possibility while we remain in this life. Article XIII of our Creed says:

The gracious help of God is pledged to all those who continue steadfast in faith; but on account of man's free will, which no power may coerce, apostasy from God is possible so long as we continue in the flesh. Wherefore, constant watchfulness, prayer and holy living are necessary on the part of man, lest he fall away from the grace of God, grieve and quench the Holy Spirit and lose his soul at last.

It is instructive that this article on apostasy begins with a reminder of the gracious help of God to all faithful believers. The intent of the article is not to instill a sense of uneasiness in the mind of the Christian. It is rather to sound a balanced, biblical warning against falling away from the living God and to strengthen and confirm believers in their faith in God's grace. This, we believe, reflects the **whole** scriptural teaching regarding assurance as well as apostasy. In taking this position we distance ourselves both from those who completely deny the possibility of apostasy and from those who hold an unbiblical, extreme view of apostasy.

One extreme view of apostasy, traditionally held by the Roman Catholic Church, teaches that the commission of one "mortal" sin robs the soul of grace and of salvation - until the sacrament of penance (or reconciliation, as it is now known) is received, or at least sincerely desired. On this view, a person could be in and out of grace over and over again. However, the resulting anxiety generated in the hearts of the faithful is softened to a great extent by the Catholic Church's rather restricted view of what constitutes a mortal sin. Less serious "venial" sins do not cause a loss of salvation and therefore do not require confession.

There is a reflection of this view on apostasy within certain segments of the Protestant Church as well. Here it can be even more threatening and cause greater anxiety since Protestants generally do not distinguish mortal from venial sins! This Protestant version teaches, or at least implies, that a single sin committed by a Christian will cut him off from God's grace and cost him his salvation. Then to regain the gift of salvation and forgiveness of sin it will be necessary once again to repent and turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ. In churches where this is emphasized, members repeatedly present themselves at the altar rail to regain their salvation - only to lose it days or weeks later when a feeling of anger or an evil thought invades the mind. Assurance of salvation is reduced to the vanishing point. There is always the threat of impending death by accident or sudden illness intruding before the sin can be confessed properly and salvation regained.

Such an approach really teaches salvation by works. We in effect must make ourselves good and worthy in God's eyes or else He will turn away and reject us. This amounts to a denial of the teaching of justification by faith taught by the New Testament, the Reformation, and the E.C. Church. Article VIII of our creed, "On Justification", reads:

Justification is that act of God by which, when we yield ourselves in full confidence to our Savior, Jesus Christ, we are freely acquitted from the guilt of sin and accounted righteous in His sight. We are accordingly justified, not by works which we perform, but by faith in Him who died for us.

Hence, we do not believe that we are saved - nor do we keep ourselves - by our good works.

On the other hand, we cannot accept the view that once a "decision for Christ" is made, no sin, unbelief, or even repudiation of the faith can change our standing before God. This view, commonly called "eternal security" is simply not according to Scripture. In the Bible, belief is expressed in the present tense. *"Whoever believes in Him"* - not whoever once believe - *"should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). The doctrine of "eternal security" may provide some persons with an absolute feeling of security; but, according to Scripture, it is a false security.

There are those who also deny the possibility of apostasy, teaching that every true believer will ultimately be saved. Because he is of the "elect" he cannot be lost. But neither will the "elect" person ever completely turn away from Christ. He may backslide, he may stumble, but he will not totally nor finally reject Christ nor completely deny His lordship over life. This "preservation of the saints," as it is called, differs from "eternal security." It insists that a professing Christian who later repudiates Christ and cares nothing for godly living was never truly a believer in the first place. But such a person, if he continues unrepentant, remains under the judgment of God. This view, then, does not offer an easy and false security; it warns of the mortal danger of unbelief and careless living.

Since we cannot look within the hearts of people, it is impossible for us to say with absolute certainty whether an "apostate" was really a true believer in the first place.

Why, then, do we teach that it is possible for one who is truly in Christ to turn away and be lost? The answer is that Scripture compels us to do so. There are numerous warning passages in the Bible that speak of the real threat and danger of apostasy. But when apostasy does occur, it is not that Christ has abandoned us. This He will never do! Rather, we have turned away from Him. *"If we deny Him,"* writes Paul, *"He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself"* (2 Timothy 2:12-13). Here is the heart of apostasy: denial of Christ. When this happens, Christ will also deny us. His remaining faithful does not negate the clear statement that "He will deny us." It means that the relationship was broken from our side and not from His.

There are other warning passages as well. Consider carefully the following:

*\*The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons* (1 Timothy 4:1).

*\*Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position"* (2 Peter 3:17).

*\*"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace"* (Galatians 5:4).

*\*"But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation - if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel"* (Colossians 1:22-23).

*\*"If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have*

known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred commandment that was passed on to them" (2 Peter 2:20-21).

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:5-6).*

*"By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you also will be cut off." (Romans 11:22).*

*"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because [or, while] they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (Hebrews 6:4-6).*

There is no doubt that this last passage from Hebrews describes true believers. It would be difficult to find words with more depth and breadth to describe the man or woman of faith. Verse six shows the seriousness of apostasy, the difficulty - perhaps the impossibility - of restoring one who is in such a condition. This should instruct us that it is certainly impossible for people to be saved, lost, and saved over and over. However, in dealing with one who has strayed from Christ and is now seeking restoration, we must not assume that Hebrews 6 applies to his condition. A penitent attitude should be indication enough that the person is not beyond the grace of God. Jesus said, *"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away"* (John 6:37).

There is the strongest assurance for the true believer that he will be kept by the power of God. *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither heights 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"* (Romans 8:38-39). This passage, however, was never intended to give false hope to apostates. It addresses those who are led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14), and intends to strengthen and encourage even the feeblest of saints.

Likewise Jesus' promise that *"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life"* (John 5:24) is given to the one who hears and believes. (Notice the present tense!) However, the logic of this verse must not be pressed unduly - as some try to do. In John 3:18 Jesus said, *"Whoever does not believe stands condemned already."* Now if this sentence of eternal death (condemnation) can be reversed through faith in Jesus Christ, why should we think it impossible for a sentence of eternal life to be reversed through apostasy?

If someone presses the question, exactly when does apostasy take place? we reply that it is difficult to say. This ought not to be surprising. Consider the fact that physicians cannot define precisely the point of physical death. Is it when one breathes his last? When one's heart stops? Or when there is no sign of brain activity? But this quandary does not prevent us from issuing death certificates or from becoming concerned when one close to us seems threatened by serious illness and death. Whenever it may occur, apostasy is an unwillingness *"to continue in faith"* (Colossians 1:23). And when one willfully and unrepentantly dishonors the name of Christ by habitual sinful behavior, we may legitimately question whether saving faith in fact exists. As James says, *"faith without works is dead"* (James 2:17).

The greatest assurance of my salvation, then, is my present, personal faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sins and in His promise that He will never leave me nor forsake me (Hebrews 13:5). To seek beyond this for a greater assurance is not really possible. "Eternal security," as we have

seen, is false security. And the view of "preservation of the saints" always carries with it the unsettling question, Am I really one of the elect? Is my faith really genuine? Or am I one of those who pretends, for a time, to believe - only to fall away and finally be lost? There is here a subtle shift away from Christ toward the quality of faith, of my inner attitude.

The biblical view of assurance and apostasy may be summed up in the words of F.F. Bruce: "The Scriptures contain encouragement enough and to spare for the feeblest believer, but are full of solemn warnings to those who think they stand to beware lest they fall" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 122).