

Can a Christian Commit Apostasy?

By James Moriello, Firm Foundation Christian Church, Woonsocket, RI 2021

“Apostasy is the formal disaffiliation from, abandonment of, or renunciation of a religion by a person. It can also be defined within the broader context of embracing an opinion that is contrary to one's previous religious beliefs. One who undertakes apostasy is known as an apostate” (Wikipedia). Strong's (646) correlates the Greek word translated “apostasy” with defection, revolt, falling away, or forsaking.

Theoretically, to the letter of the definition, it is possible for the true believer to commit this sin as a result of major life trauma (such as abuse perpetrated by a clergyman), or for some other reason. We say this because it is true that once an individual is truly saved, they are forever saved. A once for all sealed transaction takes place at the moment of salvation. Jesus said, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life”** (John 5:24). This paper presents the other side of the coin as my paper “Eternal Security: Twenty-One Proofs of the Biblical Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints”, which can be found at http://www.firmfoundationri.com/images/Eternal_Security.pdf.

Notwithstanding, the Scriptures teach that in the vast majority of cases, the sin of apostasy is committed by someone who once professed to believe the gospel, but never was truly saved. We are not called to make any sort of final determination on salvation of others, nor do we support any other doctrine of salvation other than faith alone by grace alone in Christ alone. We affirm **John 3:16** and **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**. However, we do people a terrible disservice when we give assurance of some false profession of salvation that had been made in times past. We are aiding and abetting their self-deception. Consider the possibility of teaching an individual Christian principles of life, under the assumption of salvation, when there is really no saving faith there to begin with. I would rather be guilty of preaching the gospel “unnecessarily” to someone than failing to do it “necessarily.” Rather, we should say to ourselves and challenge others to **“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified”** (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Judas Iscariot is a textbook case of apostasy. **“The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born”** (Matthew 26:24). **“Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place”** (Acts 1:25). He followed Jesus for three years, yet he went to hell, because He never truly placed his faith in Jesus as the Christ. Judas Iscariot the apostate wound up in hell, having never truly repented.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:21-23). These folks did works in Christ’s name, but they were never truly regenerated and converted.

“But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 2:18-19). Lots of people can make an assent to belief in Jesus and the facts of the gospel. But the works or lack thereof will prove whether or not the profession was genuine. We are saved by grace, but works done for Christ are the evidence of salvation.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:15-20). This is what we call the fruit test. We can discern with reasonable accuracy whether or not we or someone else is truly saved by measuring the life against the Word of God. We do not discern this to set ourselves up as judges, but rather to determine if we need to go with the gospel or Christian living in our dealings. If an individual’s lifestyle is characterized by sin rather than worship, **1 Corinthians 6:9-11** indicates that such an individual is not saved, regardless of some former profession or baptism as a youth. In **Matthew 13:1-23**, Jesus tells a parable about four kinds of soil, all who hear the gospel, some who mentally assent to it, but it is only the good ground hearers that are saved, as evidenced by their fruit bearing.

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister” (Colossians 1:21-23). The phrase in question is “if indeed you continue in the faith.” The point is that one’s fruit and continuance in the faith is evidence as to whether or not one’s profession of Christ was genuine in the first place.

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). Those who depart from the faith mentioned here are professing believers who were never genuinely saved. Their departure is evidence of that fact.

“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:18-23). No further explanation needed.

Now I would like to comment briefly on a couple verses that are often misunderstood and brought to bear on this subject, and clarify them, by setting them according to their meaning in their proper context.

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:4-6). Context is king here. The writer of Hebrews is addressing Jewish believers who were tempted to also try to keep the Law in addition to accepting Jesus as Messiah. The writer uses hyperbole to demonstrate the fact that such a thing is “impossible.” In fact, the writer points out that it is just as “impossible” for someone to believe and then fall away as it is “impossible” for Jesus to be re-crucified. This verse actually proves that it is “impossible” for a Christian believer to lose position and salvation before God. Clearly the writer was not contradicting his later and clearer statements on the subject in Hebrews 7:25 and 10:14. One could make a good argument that this also means that apostasy for the true believer is likewise “impossible.”

“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:31-32). In context, Jesus is addressing the national sin of that generation of Israel which rejected Him as Messiah. The sin spoken of here is not an individual sin, but a national sin. Otherwise, one would have to say that there are sins that Jesus did not die for, which is a denial of the clear statement of Christ’s finished and complete work in Hebrews 10:12. So this passage has no bearing at all on the individual who is committing apostasy today.