

A Study of Apostasy through Scripture: A Biblical Theological Approach

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Abstract

Apostasy is a subject that has been an intriguing question for many biblical scholars. This thesis examines apostasy from a biblical theological approach, meaning the Bible, and not Systematic Theology, has priority. First, the subject of apostasy within the covenantal context of the Old Testament is examined. Examples are given and discussed while the themes that can be gathered from this discussion are also be touched upon. Then texts addressing this issue within the New Testaments are examined and expanded upon. Finally, a conclusion of what the Bible has to say on the subject of apostasy is made.

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When it comes to issues of salvation and whether or not it is possible to fall away from saving faith, the stakes of biblical study are high. As an issue that has not only theological implications, but also practical and personal implications, apostasy is an important topic within the context of the Bible. Especially in today's day and age, with nominal Christianity being acceptable in America and the growing number of young people leaving the church, the idea of people turning away from God is not simply theoretical. Most people who have been around the church for a number of years have experienced, at one point or another, people who once claimed to believe in Christianity who no longer associate themselves with the practice. With an issue of such sensitivity and importance, it makes sense to investigate what the Bible has to say on the topic. Apostasy, according to the Bible, is any time someone fails to uphold their end of a covenantal relationship.

Apostasy in the Old Testament

When examining the idea of apostasy within the context of the Old Testament, one must be aware of the impact of covenants on the people of Israel. Covenants in the Ancient Near Eastern world were a part of multiple areas of life, with a covenant being a serious commitment to a relationship between two parties.¹ There was a weight and a seriousness that came with these covenant relationships. Not simply a verbal agreement, a covenant was more contractual in nature and required action from both parties in

¹ Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 163.

response. Understanding the idea of covenant and the affect that it had on relationships is crucial to understanding apostasy in both the Old and New Testaments.

When God established a covenant relationship with the people of Israel, He attached that same sense of obligation and commitment to it. The Sinatic covenant, also known as the Mosaic covenant, has been likened to a marriage bond, with Scripture even taking hold of this imagery.² It is with this background of the relational dynamic between God and Israel that one is able to begin to examine the role that apostasy has within the Old Testament. There are several places within the Old Testament text that this idea of apostasy plays itself out, whether with individuals or Israel as a nation.

Deuteronomy

The first example of apostasy in the Old Testament can be found in the book of Deuteronomy, which shows idolatry is a form of apostasy. In Deuteronomy 13:6-11, Moses gives instruction to kill anyone, even a family member, who so much as suggests worshiping and serving other gods. In the covenantal context, “the idolater is portrayed as a breaker of the covenant, one ‘whose heart has turned away from the Lord,’ and one who walks in the stubbornness of his heart.”³ By turning away from God to the service of other gods, the idolater had broken the covenant established with God and had thus become apostate. There are other harsh warnings against idolatry specifically, such as in Deuteronomy 30:17-18, which lists death and expulsion from the land as consequences

² Ibid., 170.

³ Edward P. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart: A Study in Biblical Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 6.

for serving other gods. However, the strong language and warnings were not the only aspect of the covenant relationship.

A theme of repentance and reconciliation follows throughout the entire book of Deuteronomy. This repentance was within the context of punishment and exile, but God does allow opportunity for the corporate repentance of the nation of Israel if and when they fall away from him.⁴ Harsh punishment was set up for individuals who would drag the rest of the nation into idolatry; however, if the whole nation was led astray, God promised them from the beginning that even in their state of exile, they would be offered the choice to repent. Thus from the beginning, the idea that God is just, but also merciful can be seen even to those who are idolaters and apostate.⁵

King Solomon

A second example of apostasy can be found in the life of King Solomon. In 1 Kings 11, the narrator of the book gives a harsh condemnation of the king for his idolatry. According to an article written by Daniel Hays, the whole point of the positive attributes and aspects of Solomon's reign told in 1 Kings 1-10 was not to give Solomon legitimate praise, but to use irony and to subtly build up to the condemnation that was to be found in chapter 11.⁶ For example, if one examines the descriptions of the building of the Temple

⁴ Mark J. Boda, *'Return to Me': A Biblical Theology of Repentance*, vol. 35, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 44. The idea of corporate apostasy and repentance is seen throughout the Old Testament repeatedly. Each time it is displayed, there is a call back to what is displayed within the Torah, especially Deuteronomy.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in the Old Testament, these two things are often entwined together. For one who is an idolater has by default become apostate, for they have turned away from God and from the Law, which is a part of the covenant.

⁶ Daniel J. Hays, "Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtlety in 1 Kings 1-11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 2 (2003): 154.

and the building of Solomon's palace, he spends only seven years on the Temple (1 Kings 6:38) but spends thirteen years on his own house (1 Kings 7:1). It is significant that these designations of time are placed right after the other, so the reader can see that Solomon spent almost twice as much time on his own home as he did on the Temple. There are similar subtleties throughout the chapters that paint Solomon in more of a negative light, until finally in chapter 11 Solomon is condemned and declared apostate for allowing his foreign wives to bring in and worship false idols.

In 1 Chronicles 28:9, David gives a warning to Solomon to follow the ways of the Lord or face the consequences of apostasy, which involve being cast off from Him forever. Solomon clearly knew the faith of his father David, but 1 Kings 11 clearly states that he turned from this faith and was lead astray into idolatry, setting the precedent for the kings that would follow after him. It was the covenant disobedience of Solomon that led to the division of the kingdom and the calamity and disobedience that followed.⁷ This disobedience was of the kind that had been warned of in Deuteronomy, so when the people of Israel broke the Mosaic covenant and still refused to repent and turn back to God, they were exiled from the land, just as it had been stated.⁸ This disobedience to the Law is very much a part of what the prophets dealt with, as it was the job of the prophets to remind the people of the consequences they would face for breaking the covenant.

⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 155.

⁸ In 2 Kings 17:7-23, the narrator gives an extended commentary on the reason for the Israelite exile. His conclusion is that because they did not believe in God and had broken the covenant, treating God with flippancy and disgrace, they were subject to suffer away from the land that had been promised to them as a part of that covenant. They abandoned the commandments given to them and worshiped idols made by human hands.

The Prophets

Third in the study of apostasy is the section of the Prophets. While King Solomon was an example of individual apostasy, the prophets focus primarily on corporate Israel or Judah turning away from the covenant made with God. There are examples of this all across the prophets, as they reference back constantly to what the people should already have known about the calamity about to befall them. Much of what the prophets did was forth-telling as opposed to foretelling, meaning that they were proclaiming truth that had already been revealed. Because Israel and Judah had so many times of turning away and being called to redemption, the few passages that are evaluated below will stand as an example of what else there is to be found in this section of Scripture.

The warning in Isaiah. In the middle of a passage emphasizing God's faithfulness to his covenant people, there is a warning to those who have forsaken his covenant. Isaiah 65:11-16 offers a warning against those who would turn away from the covenant of God, calling for their death in rather strong language by the decree of God.⁹ Idolatry was a serious crime that God clearly laid out as an offense that would be punished severely, with cases of death often being enforced. Verse 12, predicts their fate as ones "bow[ing] down to the slaughter," (which was an ironic indictment in light of their being condemned for bowing down to other gods). This passage clearly links the sin of the people as rebellion against God and the need for this attitude of rebellion to

⁹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 647. If they were not living up to their end of the covenant, then they could not expect the provision and protection that God offers to those who remain faithful. The language in this instance seems to reflect that very idea, and the death that is expected is not necessarily immediate, although it very well could be.

be removed if they are to actually serve God.¹⁰ It is clear that God actively calls out the sins and rebellion of his people all throughout the Bible, especially those who at one point were faithful, or claimed to be, but had become apostate.

Jeremiah's proclamation. Set in a later context than Isaiah, and with a different audience, Jeremiah warns of the dangers of apostasy. In 2:20-28, several metaphors are used to express the faithlessness that Judah had displayed by idolatry and the refusal to return to God.¹¹ At the end of the passage, the people of Judah are left to rely only on the gods in which they trust, even when they are calling out for God to save them. Because they had broken the covenant of their forefathers, God fulfilled his covenant promise to punish them by allowing them to experience the consequences of their failure to uphold their side of the covenant.

In Jeremiah 18:9-10, it seems that this treatment would be given not only to Judah, but to any nation entering a covenant with God. Judah was not receiving this treatment because they were any worse (or any better) than any other nation but because of their failure to uphold their end of their covenant with Him. In the previous verses, God declared that if a nation that he had decreed destruction for decided to repent, that he would respond in kind and grant them mercy.¹² This reveals the nature of God. His merciful character not only keeps his covenant promises, but extends mercy far beyond

¹⁰ Ibid., 649.

¹¹ F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 66.

¹² Ibid., 181. A good example of this happening can be found within the book of Jonah, with God's treatment of Nineveh.

that of His covenants. Thus, Judah should have known that if they repented, God would have relented.

Hosea's proclamation. As the first book of the minor prophets, Hosea's oracles portray idolatry as spiritual adultery by using the life of Hosea and the revealed word of God. While undoubtedly presenting the apostasy of Israel, Hosea also uses a beautiful metaphor of Hosea's wife and children to portray the relationship that God has with the nation as a whole as well as with the ordinary individuals within it.¹³ In this book, not only is idolatry shown as turning away from the covenant, but the idea of a marriage vow is explored in a deeper sense. Idolatry is spiritual adultery, which for the people of the time, adultery was a serious offense, one that would get people killed according to the law. Therefore, Hosea uses a construct that the people were familiar with, especially Hosea himself since his wife was the one who was depicting the faithlessness of Israel.

However, while this spiritual adultery was a serious issue, the people were not left without hope. In Hosea 14:4, the Lord says, "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them" (ESV). Interestingly, the word used here translated as apostasy in the ESV is only used fourteen times in all of the Old Testament, each time carrying the idea of faithlessness and turning from God.¹⁴ Even in the Old Testament, there is a clear narrative of redemption available, even to the apostate nation of Israel. This display of love on the part of God provides a picture that, at least in this

¹³ Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, vol. 19A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 39.

¹⁴ Edward W. Goodrick, and John R. Kohlenberger III, *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 1447.

instance of corporate apostasy, God has a pattern of mercy for those who turn back to him and take up faithfulness to the covenant again.

The judgment of Judah in Zephaniah's proclamations. The book of Zephaniah was addressed to the people of Judah, proclaiming the judgment that was yet to befall them. Zephaniah 1:4-6 expresses a strong example of apostasy, setting the tone for the oracles which follow. The word of the Lord is strongly against those who have turned from following God, including those who claim to follow him but also follow other gods. The fact that this judgment is against Judah, and even more specifically includes Jerusalem, means that not only those who do not know the truth of God but also those who do can have the wrath of God in judgment leveled against them.¹⁵ This judgment may have come as a shock to the people of the time. Jerusalem was the holy city of God, where his Temple was; but in the eyes of God, that was not as important as the condition of the hearts of his people.

It should also be noted that there is a slight shift in language that occurs in verse 6. There is a change from the sins that were actively committed to the sins that were committed through omission. Even if they were not actively seeking other gods, those who failed to seek after God were considered to have sinned in a way that was worthy of harsh judgment.¹⁶ Turning from God, or becoming apostate, therefore, did not always look like turning from God to other things, but simply the act of turning from Him to begin with. That is not to negate the seriousness of those who were worshipping other

¹⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 261.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

gods, but rather to emphasize that it does not take seeking after another god to have broken the covenant relationship with God. While they may have not been as bad as some, their hearts were not in the place that they should have been and they did not have the attitude that one whose heart was set on serving the Lord might have.

Conclusion

Throughout the Old Testament, numerous cases of corporate as well as individual apostasy occur. According to the nature of the covenant relationships, God had made certain promises to the Israelite people if they acted in certain ways, both in the positive sense as well as the negative. Since that is such a focus of the Old Testament, it would make sense that when apostasy is addressed or exemplified it is within that covenantal framework, for both the nation and the individual. Corporate Israel had, as well as a few other corporate groups,¹⁷ the opportunity to repent and restore relationship with God. However, for the individual, there seems to be more severe consequences of a more permanent nature for turning from God, although that is not always the case.¹⁸ God is clearly shown to be just as well as merciful through his interactions with individuals and nations. The implications of what is found in the Old Testament are important to understand before turning to the examples found within the New Testament, which are

¹⁷ In the book of Jonah, the people of Nineveh are called to repent of their sin, and when they do, God relents.

¹⁸ The sheer number of examples of individual apostasy makes a full evaluation of this aspect of the Old Testament impossible within this paper. Examples would include: Saul, David, the kings of Israel, most of the kings of Judah, Eli's sons, Samuel's sons, the house of Korah, etc. Each individual is examined and treated based off the severity of their offense and the intentions in their heart. In each instance there are clear consequences, though they do not always end in the death of the individual. With the extreme cases where they completely turned against God, it does indeed end in their death.

more focused on instances of the individual and are within a different covenantal context than the covenantal context of Israel.

Apostasy in the New Testament

Within the New Testament, the idea of covenant and corporate apostasy experiences a shift in light of the life and work of Jesus Christ. No longer is the covenantal context that of the Mosaic covenant, but it has been replaced, in the arrival of Jesus, with the New covenant. One must first look at what Jesus had to say on this subject in order to have a decent foundation for what the rest of the New Testament has to say on apostasy. This should be viewed with an understanding that everything the prophets said in the Old Testament is very much connected to the words of Jesus, because the Old Testament is foundational to Jesus' new covenant teachings on apostasy. As the primary historical survey of Jesus' teaching, the Gospels serve as a great starting point in the discussion of apostasy in the New Testament.

The Synoptic Gospels

Matthew 7:21-23. These verses are the words of Jesus, and he uses strong language to portray how at the end of days there will be people who do things in his name and fully believed that they were a part of the kingdom of heaven, but would hear Jesus say "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (ESV). R. T. France comments, "It raises sharply the issue of assurance of salvation, and taken alone it can be a cause of great distress to some more sensitive souls."¹⁹ This passage demonstrates that

¹⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 293.

it is perhaps possible for one to claim to have faith, and then later turn away from it, i.e. become apostate. It is clear though that while they may have thought to have been a part of the Kingdom of God and within the covenant, they never truly held it.

Matthew 24:10-13. This passage deals specifically with the apostasy of the end of this age. It would seem that when the end does come, there will be people who fall away, false teachers will lead people astray, and the love that people once had will grow cold. In contrast to those who turn away, those who endure will be saved. The reward for covenant faithfulness is that God will remain faithful in the promise of salvation. In order to have a fuller understanding of this apostasy, one must consider the opposite side of the coin which is the perseverance of faith.²⁰

The parable of the sower. Arguably, the most significant passage on the issue of salvation, or more accurately, the reaction of different people to the presentation of the gospel, is the parable of the sower. It is recorded in all three synoptic gospels, and it is extremely significant for understanding the concept of faith and the way that salvation works. Both Matthew and Luke also provide the explanation that Jesus gave for this particular parable. These passages apply to apostasy in the form of the seeds that are cast among the rocks that grew but withered because they had no root. In the explanation Jesus gives, these are the people who received the word and believed, but who fell away

²⁰ Interestingly, the contrast of those who endure versus those who fall away is seen in several other places in the New Testament, such as the epistle of James. When dealing with the issue of apostasy, naturally the idea of the perseverance to salvation is also crucial to this. Based off a biblical survey, there is good reason to believe in the perseverance of those who are truly saved. This subject is not fully addressed within this paper, as there is not space. However, there is much literature on the subject that can be read in order to gain a better understanding. A good examination of both perseverance and apostasy can be found in Robert A. Peterson's *Our Secure Salvation*, Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009.

when trials came (Luke 8:13). This parable clearly questions the idea of eternal security and brings up the implication that apostasy may be possible for those who believe.

The nuance of meaning found in the reception or belief is what is most important in this instance. Luke uses the wording of belief, while Matthew states it as a matter of receiving, but not necessarily with the implication of belief. Luke, however, distinguishes what is meant here from the kind of belief that is required by the gospel for salvation.²¹ Clearly, there is more to salvation than just the initial receiving of the gospel, which Luke sheds light on.²² Both accounts of Jesus' explanation made it clear that this falling away that happened had eternal consequences.²³ Their initial response to the word did not automatically mean that the seed had taken root. When things became difficult and their faith was tested, what faith they had crumbled, and they were not counted among those who would be joining the kingdom of heaven.

John

While John tells the same story of the same Jesus, there are some slight differences in His presentation that lead many to place John in a category of its own.²⁴

²¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, & Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 220.

²² Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus does make it evident that those who love and follow him would consequently follow his commands, so there is a covenantal loyalty that is expected in the New Covenant era. The confession of faith and subsequent belief should lead to a life that finds joy in following the commands of God.

²³ France, *Matthew*, 521.

²⁴ While this is not a comprehensive examination of what John says on the subject, there are some examples that cover apostasy.

John shows a clear understanding that covenant faithfulness was a part of what Jesus was expecting of those who followed him.

John 6:66. The first passage that will be examined within the book of John is John 6:66. It is in this verse that there is a watershed moment within the ministry of Jesus, for it is here that some of the disciples who had been following Jesus until this point chose to no longer follow him. This passage shows a display of apostasy, for they probably believed in him for something until this moment,²⁵ yet they chose to walk away from him. This moment is important for the Twelve, since they are given the choice to leave here as well.²⁶ These were the people the Jesus had called to follow him, so it seems interesting that he would give them this chance to leave of their own will. While they may not, at this point, have completely understood what Jesus was teaching and leading them in, it is still significant that they all chose to stay with him, especially Judas, who later goes on to betray Jesus. Here, he chose to follow him.

John 15:6. Another significant verse that contributes to the idea of apostasy can be found in John 15:6. Set within the passage where Jesus says, “I am the true vine” and talks about abiding in Him, there is a verse about those who do not abide. What should be examined here is what it means for someone to abide in Jesus. While this idea of abiding

²⁵ Just because people are said to have believed in Him does not mean that their belief was the kind that would lead to salvation. People came to Jesus and followed Him for all sorts of reasons, many of which were selfish or false. The Jewish concept of Messiah was rather different from what Jesus turned out to be, so their belief did not necessarily equate salvific faith.

²⁶ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 248. It is also interesting to note that this is the first time in John that the Twelve are singled out. They are only referred to in this manner in one other place, 20:24, so there is a significance to their designation being so singled out that adds to the importance of their choice.

or remaining in Jesus is found throughout the Gospel of John, it is emphasized strongly here, with the focus being on faithfulness to Christ in an active manner, with the result being the bearing of fruit.²⁷ For someone to not abide, is for them not to continue on in faithfulness to Jesus. This is the sort of temporary faith that was held by the followers who walked away or that was exemplified in the parable of the sower. A strong foreboding and sense of judgment exists for the one who does not abide, with rather strong language of being “cut off” and “burned”.²⁸ Overall, this passage holds a rather negative view of the apostate, with significant consequences detailed for those who choose to turn away.

Acts

As the main historical narrative of the growth of the Church, Acts covers many wild events as well as issues that developed early on. One of the earliest examples of apostasy shown in the community of believers is Ananias and Sapphira. Their story is told in Acts 5:1-11. This couple willingly sold their house in order to give to those who were in need among them, but ended up lying about giving the full amount of their sale when they had kept a portion back for themselves. By lying about the amount, he was in effect denying the power and ability of the Spirit of God and allowed Satan to enter his heart, as Judas had before.²⁹ For his apostasy, Ananias was struck down dead at the feet

²⁷ Ibid., 517. This idea of abiding fits in very well with covenant language.

²⁸ Ibid., 518. While there is some debate about the analogical meaning of these words, the language is strong enough to indicate the seriousness of the topic and to warn against it.

²⁹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 157. They were more concerned about their material possessions than they were about going against God, which was a bad mistake to make.

of Peter. While Sapphira also suffered the same fate, in both instances they were given the chance to repent. Peter knew that they were lying about the money, but he questioned them on the validity of the price, and neither took the opportunity that was in front of them that would have spared them. It should be noted that Peter here was to confront and not to judge, which only God can do.³⁰ The choice of these two individuals went against the covenant relationship and had dire consequences, and the precedent was set that God still desired loyalty from those He was in relationship with.

Another important passage to examine is Acts 20:28-31. In these verses, Paul is warning the leaders in the church at Ephesus to be on guard and alert for those who will rise up both inside and outside of the church to lead believers astray. While this may appear to deal more with heresy than apostasy, the two are actually rather closely entwined, in that heresy can eventually lead one to apostasy, though not always. It was not too long before false teachers did arise and draw Christians to believe in false doctrines.³¹ When one begins to step into the area of heresy, while it is not yet the complete rejection of the faith, the rejection of certain orthodox views can be dangerous. If the heresy is deep enough, then one could even be considered an apostate, as well as a heretic, if one turns their back on some of the core and foundational beliefs of the faith.

Romans

Many places within the book of Romans could have been used to address this topic. It is a theologically rich book that offers many lessons to be learned. However,

³⁰ Ibid., 159.

³¹ Ibid., 428.

there is again not enough room to cover all that this book has to offer. The examination of Romans 1:21-32 is the starting place, and is what will be covered in this work. While this passage is talking about the general population of man and not a specific group of people, the principles that can be gathered from it are still the same. Using language that is very reminiscent of Israel's fall into idolatry, Paul talks about how people who knew God turned away from him, and God's response is to let them feel the consequences of their actions.³² It appears in this passage that God gave them over to their sin once they have rejected him, which seems rather final in the judgment given. It is not only in the Old Testament context where people are seen to have replaced God with other things in their lives, but in the New Testament as well.

However, it is not only idolatry that is an issue here. Paul goes on to list all sorts of other sins that prevail in the absence of God, each one equally deserving of God's wrath.³³ Thus, the picture of any embracement of sin is seen as contrary to God. The issue is that sin separates man from God and that while someone is living in sin they cannot be able to fellowship and build that relationship. While those sins range in severity, at least in the mind of man, Paul makes it very clear that apart from God, man gets what he deserves and that is wrath and judgment. There is no provision for salvation of man outside of the saving work of Christ provided in the New Covenant that He

³² Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 61.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

established. For the apostate, who has rejected God, the outlook seems to be portrayed as rather final.

Colossians

In Colossians 2:8, Paul gives a warning to the believers to be guarded against those who might take them captive with philosophy and deceit. This verse is a warning against false teachers, using language of capture that is only found in this place within the New Testament, revealing the danger of being entirely carried off or taken away.³⁴ This warning was directed at the believing church at Colossae, warning them against the dangers of heresy that can lead to apostasy; the false teachers had the potential to lead people away from God. There is also a call to keep the teaching of God separate from the teachings of man so that one does not begin to confuse the two together in this instance.³⁵ One way to protect against people getting swept up and away from the faith is to make sure that the truth is made clear, and there is no contradiction of human reasoning that takes precedence over the Word of God.

1 Timothy

As one of the last letters that Paul wrote within the context of Scripture, 1 Timothy holds years of knowledge and wisdom that Paul is now pouring out to Timothy. At this point, Paul is coming to the last years of his ministry and has spent some time learning through trial and error the things that work and the things that can be learned

³⁴ John MacArthur, *Colossians & Philemon*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

while one is ministering. When people have been in ministry a long time and have experienced so many things, they tend to have a greater understanding of the way in which things work in the world, and in this case, Paul has a very great understanding of the faith. Thus, what he has to say here will be closely examined.

1 Timothy 1:18-20 and Paul's witness of apostasy in the lives of others. While Paul is giving a charge to Timothy to hold to the faith, he mentions those who have “made shipwreck of their faith” (ESV). The rejection that is being talked about here is willful and violent, so it was not just something that gradually happened, but specific actions that were taken which led to disaster.³⁶ The names of two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, are even given as proof of what Paul is saying. Here he is reminding Timothy that it is not correct belief alone that is necessary, but the actions that will back up that faith in the life of the believer.³⁷ By stating an example of how a rejection of that has not worked well for others, Paul is giving Timothy a warning of how to avoid the folly and ultimately apostasy that has ruined others.

1 Timothy 4:1 warns about the “later times.” One of the most common places to find talk of apostasy is in reference to the end or later times, and the beginning of 1 Timothy 4 is no exception to that.³⁸ The individuals referenced in the first three verses are definitely professing Christians who would turn from the faith, but they would not be

³⁶ Thomas E. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *1,2 Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 81.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ It should be said that this is not specifically talking about the end of time, as later passages will, but the time period that the people themselves were living in. This is not inherently apocalyptic.

known to have an empty faith until the time when they turn away from it.³⁹ The verse does not exactly make clear to what extent these individuals actually held to the faith, but it is clear that apostasy was an issue that the church at Ephesus would face. It would appear that people will claim to believe or to know the truth who really do not hold that in their hearts, and, thus, can later on be led astray.

2 Timothy

As with 1 Timothy, this letter contains wisdom from Paul at the end of his life. However, in this case, he knew that his life was coming to a close and wanted to give his last words to Timothy, who was like a son to him. The fact that part of his focus in this letter was on the fact that people would be turning from the faith speaks to the importance and relevance of this issue. It is something that Paul saw happening that needed to be addressed one last time. There are three specific times that he brings up the idea within the four chapters of this short letter.

What 2 Timothy 2:13 means for the topic of apostasy. Located at the end of a well-known, first-century Christian saying that Paul quotes, this verse can be a bit difficult to approach. It seems that there is an assurance of perseverance, even in the face of faithlessness; however, one must examine what is meant by the words faithless and faithful in this context. The word for “faithless” here does not mean “unbelieving.”⁴⁰ The part of God to be faithful could refer to his faithfulness to continue in his promises, but it

³⁹ Lea, *1,2 Timothy, Titus*, 128-29.

⁴⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988), 251.

also could mean that he is faithful to deliver judgment.⁴¹ There is room for different interpretations here, but it is clear that man is bound to fail and be faithless, but God is not. According to Lee, “Paul did not state these words to open the door to apostasy and disobedience but to soothe a troubled conscience and to provide encouragement to return to God.”⁴² This particular refrain is supposed to bring comfort and to speak to the goodness of God. The significance of the meaning of these words on the meaning that can be derived from the passage is why it is always a good idea to examine the verses within their context instead of just taking meaning from the words by themselves.

2 Timothy 3:9 and the idea of the last days. While many themes are touched upon in 3:1-9; the idea of people within the church being led astray is key, and shown to be one of the things that will happen in the last days. Again, this is warning against the false teachers that Timothy would face. The idea of false teachers being tied closely to apostasy is important to understand, for by their false teachings they are leading people away from the faith. In verse 5, he describes these teachers as “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power,” which leads to the picture of them being within the community of believers, but having rejected the truth of Christ.⁴³ In the following verses, Paul lists some of the people whom these false teachers would prey upon, and, in this instance, it was the women who were weak, burdened by sin, and easily led astray. This reproof is not a condemnation of women in general, but a specific instance of the women

⁴¹ Lea, *1,2 Timothy, Titus*, 211.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 226.

in Ephesus who were being led astray.⁴⁴ It is interesting that he lists out the reasons why these women were so easily led away from the truth, as it seems to suggest that this is prescriptive for the specific situation, but not necessarily for all women in general.

A final warning against false teachers in 2 Timothy 4:3-4. Again referring to the future that is coming fast upon them, Paul gives one final touch upon false teachers and how people will turn to them. After giving Timothy a charge to make sure that what he is teaching is sound, Paul explains that times are coming when people will only be interested in novelty and things that sound good rather than the truth, and this is from people who are within the community of believers.⁴⁵ There will be false teachers who do not speak the truth, but there will be a demand for them eventually because people who claim to have faith will grow discontented with the truth and exchange it for a lie.⁴⁶ Paul gives Timothy the charge that he does so that he will not compromise on the truth when people start to push against him. If there is one thing that really matters it is making sure that the truth is what is being taught, so that there is little room for confusion and turning away from what God has intended.

Hebrews

Perhaps one of the books with the most literature on the idea of apostasy, Hebrews presents a challenge with the warning passages found there. Since these passages are strongly worded and the ambiguity that can sometimes surround the usage

⁴⁴ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁶ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 286.

of certain words, they force the reader to examine the issue of assurance and the possibility of apostasy.⁴⁷ Therefore, these passages must be approached carefully and with a mindfulness that today's context is not the context into which they were written. They are absolutely necessary passages that must be examined in today's world, but with their original context at the forefront. Only three out of the five warnings will be discussed, as they do not all directly relate to apostasy.⁴⁸

The warning found in 3:12. While the entire warning passage is from 3:7-4:13, for the purposes of this work, the focus will be on 3:12. It is within the first section of the passage, which focuses on the history of Israel and their unfaithfulness.⁴⁹ This unfaithfulness is used as a sort of example of what not to do and how easy it can be to fall away. In this context, the unbelief is placed in Jesus, and the falling away would be a return to Judaism, which would be a renouncement of the gospel and a form of the ultimate, irretrievable sin.⁵⁰ This expands the idea of apostasy from to not just turning away from God, but also turning away from Christ. Since this was addressed to Jewish Christians, it would be understandable for them to be tempted to return to Judaism.

⁴⁷ Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 24.

⁴⁸ A more thorough treatment of these passages, as well as the passages not touched on here, and different approaches to them can be found within the book edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Four views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*.

⁴⁹ Bateman, *Four Views*, 44.

⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Revised*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 100.

However, within this passage, there is a call to remember the unfaithfulness of their forefathers and to continue in their commitment to Christ.

The warning of 6:4-8. These verses are rather strong in their language and treatment of this issue. The implication here would be that apostasy is irredeemable, with the continuance of the faith being the true test of real faith.⁵¹ The reason given for this is that by learning about Christ and then choosing to reject him even after knowing about him is as if they are crucifying him all over again. This is not accidental rejection, but a completely willful, deliberate apostasy.⁵² According to this passage, there is no chance of redemption for this individual, which may seem harsh, but put in the way that the author of Hebrews portrays it as just.

The warning of 10:26-31. The biggest thing that this passage touches on is the idea of the consequences of “willful” sin.⁵³ It is clear from this passage that willful sin will be judged by God and that he will most definitely avenge the sins committed.⁵⁴ There is obviously some expectation of transformation in the life of the believer which would back up the faith that they profess. This willful sin is intended to represent outright apostasy and rejection of the faith, which would be in line with what has been touched on in the other warning passages.⁵⁵ This passage is not a call for believers to be sinless, but

⁵¹ Ibid., 144.

⁵² Ibid., 148-49.

⁵³ Willful sin being sin that is committed, knowing full well that one should not be doing it and knowing the God honoring way in which one should act, yet choosing not to act that way.

⁵⁴ Bateman, *Four Views*, 67.

⁵⁵ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 261.

rather a warning that a flagrant disregard of the faith would mean that one has become apostate and can no longer be secure in the hope of grace when it comes to the judgment.

James

While James 1:12 may not be referring to apostasy, it is about perseverance, which can yield truths that can be applied to what apostasy is not. In this verse, the hallmark of what makes faith something that is real or not is faith remaining under trial. Going as far back as the parable of the sower, this theme has persisted. It would be fair to say that “faith that is not tried and true is worthless.”⁵⁶ For the ones that endure, there is a reward, so those who do not, therefore, will not receive that reward, which would include the apostate. When faith is taken up, there is really no way to know if it is true faith or not, until the time of testing comes.

2 Peter

There is a brief passage in the book of 2 Peter that makes reference to those who have gone back on their faith. In 2:20-22, there is some debate whether the subject is false teachers or new Christians being led astray; however, regardless of which of those subjects is correct, the principle still remains the same.⁵⁷ Verse 20 speaks of the knowledge that they had of Christ as Savior, but that they have since turned from that. Regardless of whether they are leading or following, they have become apostate, which is why the following verses speak of it having been better for them to have never known the

⁵⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 311.

truth at all. They now face eternal judgment, similar to as the other passages on apostasy have either stated or inferred.⁵⁸

The Epistles of John

1 John. The epistles of John, while short letters, are very dense with significant material. In 1 John 2:19 the idea of apostasy is once again touched upon. When talking about the antichrists in the last days,⁵⁹ John talks of them going out from the believers but not being of them. While this is more of a positive teaching of perseverance, John makes it clear that those who became apostate were never a part of the church and did not belong to Christ.⁶⁰ This picture makes it apparent that there is a visible difference between the real believers and the apostate, though it may take time to see such a difference. It is implied here that the believers that John is writing to have experienced or will experience an exodus of apostates, so he is providing explanation of such an event so that they can take comfort in the fact that those who left were never truly a part of them.

2 John. There is a warning for believers in 2 John 8-11. He makes it very clear that in order to “have God,” one must be abiding in Christ, and that those who do not abide, do not have a part of God. They must be careful not to be so eager for progression of the faith that they leave and reject the teachings of Christ, which ultimately leads to their ruin.⁶¹ Again, the idea of abiding is very important, which gives faith an active

⁵⁸ Ibid., 313.

⁵⁹ The spirit of antichrist is something that will be expressed through those who are dogmatically opposed to Christ and Christians in the end times.

⁶⁰ Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary*, 277.

⁶¹ Ibid., 382.

quality, not just a once and done kind of salvation. In order to guard against being led astray, John does tell the believers not to associate with those who are false teachers. Furthermore, false teachers and apostasy can be correlated in that one very often leads to the other. John recommends this because by that point the person has betrayed Christ and is completely antichristian.⁶²

Conclusion

Through all of the different passages and verses examined, a clear picture of apostasy and its consequences has emerged. The apostate is someone who has deliberately rejected God and have turned away from the covenant relationship, which would include the truth and revelation of God. However, at least in the context of the New Covenant, they were never true believers themselves. In the covenantal context of the Old Testament, those who worshiped idols and broke the covenant were handled differently, based on the circumstance. It was clear from Scripture that God was very concerned in distinguishing real faith from false faith.⁶³ The emphasis in both covenants is loyalty to God, and God in his mercy clearly allows for repentance, but not indefinitely and without consequence. It is clear that people can know the truth and think that they believe it, or at least claim to, but fall away when that belief is tested. Though set in different contexts, the apostasy displayed in both the Old and New Testaments show a consistency in the character of God and the expectations that he has for his covenant relationships, though the details may vary.

⁶² Ibid., 384.

⁶³ Peterson, *Our Secure Salvation*, 205.

Christians should not live in fear that they may become one of the apostate, but rather should have a guard up against those who go against the truth presented to them in the Bible or against Christ himself. While apostasy does dance around the idea of salvation, and the two ideas are very closely tied, there is not a clear enough picture of how these two interact to comment upon salvation within the confines of this paper. It is important to be prepared for the hard things that will be faced in the life of the Christian, and this issue of apostasy is something that has been under debate for centuries, with many different people taking different sides to the issue. However, based on what is in the Bible, apostasy for the true believer is not possible, but only happens to those who do not truly hold the faith and are not abiding in Christ.

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