

J. C. Wenger (1910-1995). *Introduction to Theology: A Brief Introduction to the Doctrinal Content of Scripture Written in the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition*. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1954: 306-309)

It is perfectly evident from dozens of statements in the New Testament that it is the will of God to keep Christians from apostasy, and that He is able to do so. Jesus Himself said: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” [John 10:27-29] In other words, God has saved us. He is able to keep us, and He intends to do so. God promises eternal security to those who are in Christ.

The Bible does not teach security in sin, however. In the strongest possible terms the Scriptures warn against not only the possibility but even the danger of apostasy. This is not because of a lack of ability on the part of God, nor a lack of faithfulness on His

part to His promises. The possibility of apostasy arises from the fact that Christians are still in the flesh, still in need of the grace of God, and continually undergoing temptation and trial. The security of the child of God is in Christ and not in sin. The New Testament therefore warns against falling away. Jesus Himself said, in reference to the seed sown on rocky ground: “This is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” [Matt 13:20-22] Paul wrote to the Christians of Colossae that God had now reconciled them “in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him,” but then Paul adds by way of a warning, “provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard.” [Col 1:22-23] Similarly, the Letter to the Hebrews warns: “Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” [Heb 2:1] And again, “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.” [Heb 3:12-14]

Perhaps the most startling warning in the New Testament against apostasy is found in Peter’s Second Letter, where he speaks of a person being overcome and enslaved to sin: “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.” [2 Pet 2:20-21] Peter then uses two illustrations of regeneration and sanctification: a dog who has been delivered from his sickness, and a sow who has been washed clean of the mire. Every honest exegete must admit that the illustrations are warnings about what can happen to the Christian who has been spiritually delivered from his sin and cleansed of his guilt.

James in his practical Letter speaks also of a Christian wandering from the truth. [James 5:19] And Jesus Himself spoke of the trying days that

were to come: “And because wickedness is multiplied, most men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved.” [Matt 24:12-13] He also gave the following warning: “If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.” [John 15:6]

It is only fair to ask the question whether these warnings are merely theoretical, or whether individual Christians ever do actually lose out. On this point Paul says: “By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” [1 Tim 1:19-20] In the same Letter Paul reports: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” [1 Tim 4:1] And in his Second Letter to Timothy, Paul writes about the godless chatter of the wicked, “and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’” [2 Tim 2:17-19] When Paul wrote his Letter to the Colossians he was able to say: “Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you,” [Col 4:14] but when he wrote his Second Letter to Timothy he regretfully reported, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me” [2 Tim 4:10] Judas himself is an example of a man whom Christ wished to transform into a mighty apostle but who allowed his love of money to transform him into a traitor, even “a devil.” [John 6:70] Judas stooped so low in his thievery that he “used to take what was put” into the treasury of Christ and the apostles.” [John 12:6] Instead of allowing Christ to make of him a powerful witness to His resurrection, Judas clung to his weakness, allowed it to overcome him, and finally “fell away” from his apostleship. [Acts 1:25]

Those who teach a doctrine of unconditional eternal security sometimes object to the possibility of apostasy by holding that a regenerated person would never *wish* to return to a life of sin and

to become an apostate. This fact is of course altogether true. The answer to the objection lies in the fact that believers can grow cold little by little, and ultimately find themselves with but little desire to return to Christ in penitence and renewed obedience. The steps in apostasy undoubtedly are somewhat as follows: first of all, the individual becomes too busy or unconcerned to maintain a faithful devotional life of Bible meditation and prayer. This results in a certain state of lukewarmness in which it becomes easy to harbor, if only briefly, a sinful desire or attitude. This attitude may be one of envy, pride, hatred, sensuality, or avarice. The unsanctified state of attempting to cling to a “minor sin” for a time in turn promotes the very neglect of Bible reading and prayer which brought about the state of lukewarmness to begin with. As the individual becomes more and more cold spiritually his zeal for the Lord’s cause slackens. After a time overt acts of sin begin to occur in his life. These falls into sin are accompanied by a decreasing concern about sin and its guilt. There comes also a determination, and this is something new, to continue enjoying sin for the time being; the first intention was merely to indulge briefly. There is less and less interest in returning to a holy Christian life as time goes on and the apostasy becomes more severe. All this takes place in spite of fierce inner struggles of conscience, repeated chastisements of God, and generally the warnings of other Christians.

We are again reminded of Jeremy Taylor’s (1613-67) description of the downward progress of the apostate: “First it startles him, then it becomes pleasing, then delightful, then frequent, then habitual, then confirmed; then the man is impenitent, then obstinate, then resolved never to repent, then damned.” [Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 651]