

A Portrait of Apostasy

It can be a heart wrenching experience when someone you have grown to respect walks away from the faith. This is especially true when you are young and impressionable, and in need of good role models around you in the church. Young believers are in need of good and wholesome examples who have walked the road of faith, despite their weaknesses, and have been proven by the trials they have endured in the process (Jas. 1:2-3) that they are in the faith.

Its is truly lamentable, but I have had my own share of disappointments as it involves the people I have been influenced by. Let me start with an example from my youth and then I will move right to the present. In my early twenties I used to be a keen follower of the band Jars of Clay. What was refreshing to me about the band was their lyrical, poetic, and rhythmic interpretations of biblical truths, even though they weren't particularly marketed as a Christian contemporary band. I was mesmerised by songs like "Flood," "Sad Clown," "Famous Last Words," and "Portrait of an Apology" all for their musical versatility and poetic appeal. I objectively judged these songs for its musical and lyrical quality all the while knowing the band's intention is not to be a "Christian band," but rather a regular band who happen to be Christians, and that was good to me. But then in the early 2000's they seemed to have come out as an overtly Christian band when they released their "Redemption Songs" album. This was a magnificent retweaking of some of the most well-known traditional hymns, and even some that I didn't even know existed. Again I was impressed by the band's rendition of these hymns, this time being totally convinced that they are on the straight and narrow.

Then disappointment hit in 2014 when the front-man, Dan Haseltine, released this tweet on his Twitter account about gay-and-lesbian unions: "Not meaning to stir things up BUT... Is there a non-speculative or non "slippery slope" reason why gays shouldn't marry? I don't hear one." After a tsunami of responses to this tweet the musician reacted with these words: "I'm trying to make sense of the conservative argument. But It doesn't hold up to basic scrutiny. Feels akin to women's suffrage." And then this one: "I just don't see a negative effect to allowing gay marriage. No societal breakdown, no war on traditional marriage. ?? Anyone?"

Regardless of his tweeting back and forth and his trying to explain what he meant, there was some major carnage left in the wake of his original comment. It raised more than one pair of eyebrows and rightly so, since his comments were in clear violation of what the Bible teaches on the subject.. Saddened by this twitter affair, I suspected that I was witnessing the visible signs of a slip into apostasy for the leading man of Jars of Clay.

Fast forward to the present year and the tweeter, or Instagrammer I should say is no less Joshua Harris, another American who had me seriously fooled about his true state of heart. The famous writer of "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" came out with the truth a few weeks ago when he admitted that he had "kissed" the faith goodbye, this after the revelation of his separation from his wife. Harris said: "I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is 'deconstruction,' the biblical phrase is 'falling away.' By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian. Many people tell me that there is a different way to practice faith and I want to remain open to this, but I'm not there now."

I must admit this was a REAL shocker. Although, I had my suspicions about Josh Harris when he chose to study at Regent college over Southern Baptist seminary for instance, which would have been a more 'normal' choice for someone who developed as a pastor under the auspices of Sovereign Grace

Ministries. Little did I know that this decision was the first in a series of decisions that would eventually send Harris down the road of unorthodox views of Scripture, in his case, leading to an outright abandonment of the faith. It's not just the choice of theological schooling, but it soon manifested in an effort from him to denounce his earlier book about dating.

And just to comment on this for a moment, I might not have agreed with his main argument about ditching dating altogether in "I Kissed Dating Goodbye," but that doesn't mean that I could not appreciate the appeal to sexual purity that the book calls for. In fact, I think he did a great job with that and with his follow up book, "Not Even a Hint," which was solely about sexual purity. But for him this apparently became a source of embarrassment and he even had Amazon Books add the disclaimer that he no longer endorses the principles set forth in his book.

Then in the final straight that leads to apostasy, we eventually hear about his divorce and the crunching clincher short on its heels, when he finally announced his "deconstruction" from the faith. But this was not all...

And that's how these things often go — sadly. Just as you thought it was all done, news breaks about Harris' participation in a LGBTQ+ march in British Columbia, his home since he started at Regent:

"To the LGBTQ+ community, I want to say that I am sorry for the views that I taught in my books and as a pastor regarding sexuality... I regret standing against marriage equality, for not affirming you and your place in the church, and for any ways that my writing and speaking contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry. I hope you can forgive me."

This is truly startling. One cannot help but wonder what his next step is going to be. Is all of this in effort to prepare us for the moment he himself crawls "out of the closet?"

Someone might want to scream right now, "Okay, we get it, but show the guy some compassion," and they would be right. I am not saying these things to beat him with a stick. But I am saying it because I myself am trying to deal with this news as biblically as I can. This is shocking coming from a guy whom we trusted with our coming of age trials and temptations. We learnt so much from him as it involves understanding and living the gospel. But now he has gone from evangelist to the one who himself must be *evangelised*.

So how should we respond to this because it is rather confusing. Is he really saved and just sinning gravely? Was he truly saved, and then became unsaved? Or was he never saved to begin with? These are all questions that we are tempted to ask. Here's a simple synopsis of what we are dealing with in situations like these, biblically speaking:

There will be people in the church who at times look like they are Christians, talk like they are Christians, smile like they are Christians, act like they are Christians, but who deep down are actually not true Christians. This is truly a sad testimony of human depravity. But in the same breath it should not surprise us. Sure, these things are disappointing and dreadful to witness, but they are an accurate reflection of the deceitfulness of the human heart. Since a saved person can never lose his salvation, we are therefore forced to say that unless some form of recantation soon comes from Harris' side about his most recent public announcements, we are forced to acknowledge that he was never saved to begin with. Unless he says something like, "I was wrong," "forgive me for what I said," "forgive me for denying the faith, I actually want to cling to Jesus for the rest of my life and I ask him to forgive me for my unbelief," "I really believe that homosexual unions are sinful" and we see him repent of his sin and bitterly weep like Peter who denied the Lord — we will be forced to see him as an unbeliever who was never saved to begin with and who had everyone seriously fooled.

But still the phenomenon of apostasy might be puzzling to some of us. For those among us who struggle with the fact that someone can have a testimony of faith the one day and then the opposite the next, I offer that Scripture is not silent on the subject but rather comprehensive. Scripture does indeed paint for us a detailed picture or 'portrait' with regards to the nature of apostasy so that we can understand, identify, and rid it from the church. There are indeed many ways in which it is portrayed in Scripture. For time constraints however, we will only look at its theology, it's opposite, and that which acts as its catalyst for the remainder of our time in the subject.

1. The Theology of Apostasy (1 Jn. 2:19)

The apostle John helps us to understand the theology that lies behind any kind of "falling away" from the faith. In the second chapter of his first epistle to the churches he warned his readers about the kind of response that some people might have after having observably received the Lord Jesus and having committed to following him.

The picture that John paints is far more dire than a mere departure from the faith. He describes these kind of apostates as "antichrists." In the context of John's epistle this term refers specifically to those who were teachers in the church. They had a very important job to fulfil in the church, but it became obvious through their denunciation of core doctrine that they were not really of the faith, but that they were rather still in their sin. Let's see how John warns his readers:

"¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹ 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 it might become plain that they all are not of us."

It becomes quite clear that John has in mind men who were teachers of the Word because they "went out from us." This is an eye-opening concession. A verse earlier he talks about anti-Christ, or those who go against Christ in that which they stand for, and now here in verse 19 he makes it quite obvious that these were people who were in the midst of the church.

And this can be the nature of apostasy. It takes one person with a "new perspective" on something that is sub-standard to the traditional understanding of a certain doctrine and before one can blink, the church is threatened by heresy from within its own ranks. From John's context these should not be seen as something out of the ordinary. Rather, these were ordinary people who were given the opportunity to teach, many of whom perhaps excelled at their responsibility. But then something happens along the line that causes them to have a change of heart — an alteration of viewpoint of sort — that sends them down the slippery slope of unbelief eventually allowing this poison to spread through the entire church.

Sadly when this happens to the teachers in the church, it can be devastating. It can send shock waves of doubt through a congregation when a well-respected pastor goes off the beaten track and leads a following of people along with him down that slippery path. Women are not exempt of this. It could be a lady who had been effective in children's ministry or teaching the younger women who goes astray and in the process causes the flock to doubt certain core doctrines of the faith.

When this happens it is the church's responsibility to purge the false teaching from among them. This is why Paul instructed the Galatians that if anyone preaches a gospel contrary to the one they had received in the beginning, such a person should be counted as accursed (Gal. 1:9). But often these false teachers or false converts wish not to remain with the church but rather to head out. Often they

seek to surround themselves by other 'like-minded' individuals, perhaps people who also had been disenfranchised from their churches due to unorthodox views of Scripture.

This is not a bad thing. This is a blessing. And even if they did remain, the process of church discipline would not allow for them to continue on in their unbelieving pattern for very long. And to this end John explains: *"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 it might become plain that they all are not of us."*

Another way of saying this might be: They confessed the faith that we confess. We heard their testimonies of salvation and it even drew us to tears when we saw them go through the waters of baptism. We witnessed their faithful service to the Lord and the church and were ourselves even blessed by their faithful character. We were blessed by their giftedness and some of them were extremely gifted in various areas. But it became plain that they were not saved to begin with because they did not remain in the faith. They adopted a view of Christ, faith in him, and service unto him that is below the biblical standard and so they have become a law to themselves.

So the point that John makes is that they will depart. This might not even translate in a literal departing from a given congregation. It can already manifest itself in a departing from the truth that was handed down to us, starting with the apostles. It is a departing that opposes the most cherished truths of the Christian Faith and it manifests itself in a disagreeable attitude toward a time-tested statement of faith, for instance. Over time it becomes more and more visible as certain members disagree over things they previously did not. It's end, as John explains, is a literal departing. This is the final step in a line of yielding to the lies of Satan, doubting the core tenets of the faith, and to even propagate their newfound views.

Finally John makes plain the fact that these false converts or false teachers explicitly deny the very one who they previously confessed saved them. They deny the Lord Jesus Christ in word and in deed. This is why John inserts in verse 22-23:

²² Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.

²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father."

Their sin is unbelief. If anyone denies the faith it automatically becomes a denial of Jesus. If there is true faith then there will be a true confession of Jesus Christ the Son of God. But if it is false faith then it is truly a denial of the one to whom faith must be directed. John's encouragement to his readers in the midst of apostasy is to cling to the original truth that they were given when they first got saved. And this is what we should do as well.

Invariably, by discussing the nature of, or the theology behind apostasy, he also instructs the church to persevere in the faith. And this is the opposite of apostasy.

2. The Opposite of Apostasy (1 Jn. 2:19)

There are really only two groups of people in this world. Saved and unsaved. In the church the same can be true. Sadly, in every church there will always be a number of people who are there for other reasons than a commitment to their faith in the Lord Jesus, but then alongside this group there will be those who are truly saved and who are truly committed to living a godly life. There is nothing supernatural that can reveal this to us except good old fashioned "perseverance." Perseverance is an indisputable mark of a true believer. When we say that a Christian will persevere in the faith we mean

to say that a Christian, in spite of indwelling sin, will continue to live like a Christian for the rest of their lives.

This is the very point that John seeks to help his readers make sense of, concerning the departing of certain people who used to confess the name of the Lord Jesus. The key lies in verse 19 yet again: *“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 it might become plain that they all are not of us.”*

In other words, the key to genuine Christianity, or being genuinely saved lies not so much in the initial confessing part, and it is definitely an important part, but it lies in the actual continuance of this confession and the redeemed way of life. The key to knowing why some will fall away is to understand that certain people who at some point in their life confessed faith in the Lord will eventually make plain that they were not saved to begin with because of their departure, or stated differently, because of their non-perseverance in the faith. Perseverance is what it all boils down to.

This does not mean that Christians are sinless. The same John who wrote these words warns very sternly against the denial of one’s sin. There is no way we can mistake John as preaching a certain perfectionism. Not after we read these words from his first chapter: *“⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”* In other words, we will continue to be sinners in this life prior to final glorification. But regardless of the presence of sin and its noetic effects, we will persevere as Christians until our dying day, or the Rapture, whichever happens first. In a nutshell, perseverance means that, as Wayne Grudem puts it:

“...all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.”

This is a helpful definition because it shows both sides of the coin. On the one side it acknowledges the fact that not only is salvation a work of God but that our perseverance in the faith is also something that he brings to completion. On the other side, however, is the fact that you and I must strive hard to actually be identified as Christians. That’s why the definition calls for an active role to play. We are called by God to persevere in an active sense thus proving that we have truly been born again.

Jesus made this quite clear when he addressed his disciples in John 6:38-40, saying:

*“³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, **that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me,** but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

The same is true of Jesus’ words in chapter 10:27-29:

*“²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, **and they follow me.** ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and **they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.** ²⁹ 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.**”*

The above quoted passage speaks of both the assurance that the believer enjoys in Christ but also the fact that they will persevere in the faith to end.

When we see a falling away from the faith it should not strike us as puzzling. Rather, it will help us to make sense of it by reminding ourselves that true Christians will persevere to the end. But one cannot help to wonder what might be some of the factors that contribute to this 'falling away,' or departure. Apart from the obvious false teaching, and outright denial of the faith, what are some of the visible signs that could tip us off to someone's slipping down the slippery slope of unbelief? It seems as if the Bible's answer to this question is "worldliness."

3. The Catalyst for Apostasy (2 Tim. 4:10)

Worldliness can be seen as the catalyst that leads a person down the slippery path of unbelief. Paul mentions this fact about some of the people who served alongside him in the cause of the gospel. It's summarised in this little bit of information that he provides us at the end of his second letter to Timothy: *"¹⁰ For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia"* (2 Tim. 4:10).

In a nutshell, some will desert the faith and will even be quite abrupt in their decision to leave. Demas had been one of Paul's faithful labourers for the gospel, and he is even mentioned in a list of allies along with Luke. But it is quite obvious from Paul's choice of words that Demas loved his sin too much to continue to be counted as a disciple of Christ. He fell in love with this present world. Said differently, he never actually denounced the world to begin with. He never really denied self and sin and embraced the Lord, committing to live for him for the rest of his life.

With this attitude and desire already in place it was not that difficult for Demas to completely desert the Lord and the gospel altogether. The Greek language employed here speaks of a quick and decisive response. It is a complete abandonment that is in mind here. We find its opposite in the complete abandonment by which the first disciples were called by our Lord to follow him. With this kind of commitment Demas left the truth and faith that he ostensibly lived by previously. But again, it seems quite clear that he was not saved to begin with since he persevered on this road of unbelief.

Demas' love for this present world is what became the catalyst for his already present unbelief. And it is a love for this present world that will remain the big catalyst to reveal false faith, or false conversion. I have heard countless stories about the same thing occurring in every church, on every block. This is why John warns against a love for the world (1 Jn. 2:15-17). Even true Christians can fall for the lies of the world. But the difference is that true Christians will eventually slip from under its claws, and escape. The problem in loving the world is that if it becomes a way of life, and a Christian falls back into those old sinful habits while justifying them, with no remorse or the will to repent, we can only make sense of that by saying that this person never actually knew the Lord to begin with. But again, it is the way we go about in this world that could reveal this fact.

There are, to be sure, other ways in which false conversion can be made evident. The Lord Jesus certainly proved this to an audience when he told a parable about a sower who sowed seeds (Matt. 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15). Some seeds fell on the wayside, some fell among rocks, and again others fell among thorns. The seed along the wayside had no chance to germinate since birds picked them off. The seed that fell among the rocks managed to develop a bit but was eventually scorched by the sun since they had no depth. Lastly, there were seeds among the thorns, which were choked by them.

Jesus eventually tells his disciples what he meant by these seeds:

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was

sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ 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. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

So there are other reasons for people’s denial of the faith. For one, the seed that fell on the path, well, there was no visible signs of being saved there at all. But for the rest there were. For the seeds that fell among the rocks it was tribulation and persecution that caused their true colours to come out. Because they were not truly rooted in Christ they could not persevere. In other words they were not truly saved to begin with. But then the Lord turns to the seed that fell among thorns. These seeds were affected by this present world just like Demas. They fell into a lust for wealth and became engulfed by a truckload of cares for this world, and in the end they were also revealed as false converts and that they were not saved to begin with.

Only one set of seeds were commended by the Lord. These were the seeds that fell into the wholesome soil. These seeds eventually germinated and developed into luscious fruit bearing plants.

This describes those who are truly saved, and this alone describes them. People will join the church and they will leave the church. They will confess the name of the Lord and have some visible signs and then they will deny the faith altogether. But true believers will remain. They will persevere to the end and bear fruit as they do!