

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Apostasy

Our English word *apostasy* is derived from the Greek word APOSTASIA (a compound word from APO, *from* and STASIS, a *station* or *standing*). Thus to depart from where one once was – desertion of a post. A related word is the Latin term PERFIDIAE which refers to the abandonment of belief. MacArthur writes, “An *apostate* is therefore a defector from the truth—someone who has known the truth, given some show of affirmation to it, perhaps even proclaimed it for a while—but then rejected it in the end. The typical apostate may still purport to believe the truth and proclaim the truth; but in reality he opposes the truth and undermines it. He is a traitor to the faith and secretly an enemy in the Truth War. But he wants everyone to think otherwise. Most apostates seek to remain within the church and actively seek acceptance among the people of God. Because everything they do undermines faith and corrupts the truth, such people pose a grave danger to the health of the flock—even though they usually bend over backward to appear friendly, likable, and pious. That is why Jesus compares them to ravenous wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15)... Apostasy can have far-reaching and disastrous effects on an entire congregation’s spiritual health. When false teaching goes unchallenged, it breeds more confusion and draws still more shallow and insincere people into the fold. If not vigorously resisted, apostasy will spread like leaven through seminaries, denominations, missions agencies, and other Christian institutions. False teaching thus attacks the church like a parasite, affecting our corporate testimony, inoculating people against the real truth of the gospel, proliferating false and halfhearted ‘disciples,’ and filling the church with people who are actually unbelievers. By such means, entire churches and denominations have been taken over by apostasy.”¹

Last week, we examined the need for mortification by looking at the work of the puritan great, John Owen, whose work on this subject is considered a classic. But Owen also wrote a significant work on the subject of Apostasy. Here is a summary of what Owen wrote.²

1. The perseverance of the saints

Some Christians will be shaken by the apostasy of another professing Christian. “If he can fall then what hope is there for me?” So, preach God’s great promises of eternal security to His true people (John 6:39, 40; 10:28, 29).³

2. Apostasy is to be expected

This should really be preached before apostasy occurs, to prevent people being taken by surprise when it does happen. The whole Old Testament is a story of Israel’s apostasy. In the New Testament, we have individual apostates such as Judas and Demas. Some in Corinth denied the resurrection, and some in Galatia went back to the law as a way of salvation. No wonder the Apostles urged the churches to expect apostasy (Acts 20:29-30; I Cor. 11:19; I Tim. 4:1; 5:8; Jude; I John 2:19).

3. The danger areas of apostasy

John Owen highlighted three areas in which apostasy usually begins: doctrine, lifestyle, and worship. Owen traced doctrinal apostasy to a lack of Christian experience. He said that when someone has no experience of personal need, no sense of God’s righteousness, no spiritual sight of Christ’s glory, no submission to the sovereignty of God, and no trembling at God’s Word, then doctrinal apostasy is just around the corner. Owen actually regarded an unholy lifestyle as more likely to produce apostasy than abandoning some Christian doctrines. He saw both legalism and lawlessness as leading eventually to

apostasy. Owen also argued that if we neglect, refuse to observe, or add to God's instructions for worship, apostasy will not be far behind. Pastors should highlight these three danger areas of doctrine, lifestyle, and worship, and urge watchfulness upon the flock.

4. The causes of apostasy

Owen went on to list particular causes of apostasy, so that pastors and their congregations will "watch and pray."

- Deeply-rooted and unremoved enmity in the minds of many against spiritual things
- Pride and vanity of the mind which refuses to bow before the authority of Scripture
- Sloth and negligence
- False assurance and groundless self-confidence
- False sense of security due to neglect of the Spirit's warnings about apostasy
- Love of the world and its passing pleasures (Demas in II Tim. 4:10)
- As the first "apostate" Satan draws many into apostasy and forces others to apostatize through persecution
- Persons in high positions in the church leading evil lives (Jer. 23:15; I Sam. 2:12-17)
- Unrepented national sins that influence the people
- Divisions in the church
- The uselessness of many Christians

5. The Distinction between a stumble (Peter) and a fall (Judas)

Pastors need to skillfully distinguish between a Christian's stumble and an apostate's fall. Every Christian errs in doctrine, falls into sin, and offers faulty worship from time to time. That does not make them an apostate. Owen defined apostasy as "continued persistent rebellion and disobedience to God and his word," or "total and final and public renunciation of all the chief principles and doctrines of Christianity."

6. The abomination of apostasy

Hebrews 6 describes apostasy as "crucifying again the Son of God and putting him to an open shame." By declaring they have tried Christ and His Gospel and found no truth or goodness in them, apostates do exactly what the Jews did. In fact, Owen says Christian apostasy is worse because the Jews did it in "ignorance."

7. God's judgment on apostasy

In addition to reminding the professing Christians in the congregation of how abominable apostasy is in God's sight, they also need to be shown from Scripture the temporal, spiritual, and eternal judgments that fall on apostates. God uses His descriptions of how he abominates and judges apostasy as a means of grace to keep people from apostasy.

8. The need for perseverance

God's great promises of the perseverance of the saints are given to those who persevere in the means of preservation that God has provided. Christians need to be reminded of the incalculable need and value of the Church, the Word, the sacraments, and fellowship.

9. How to avoid apostasy

John Owen wanted Christians to know that apostasy could be avoided by heart-cure and heart-care (Prov. 4:23). Keep the Gospel at the very center of our hearts; love its truth and experience its power there. Keep sin out of our hearts, especially the highly-dangerous sins of spiritual pride and a censorious, judgmental spirit.

CONCLUSION: The noted Reformed theologian W. G. T. Shedd wisely observed, "Exhortations to diligence and warnings against carelessness and failure are consistent with the certain perseverance of the believer because (a) while the certainty is objective in God, it may not be subjective in man. God knows that a particular man will certainly persevere, because he purposes that he shall, and he will realize his purpose by the operation of his Spirit within him; but the man does not know this unless he has assurance of faith. Many believers do not have this highest degree of faith and hence are more or less subject to doubts and fears. Exhortations to diligence and warnings against apostasy suit such an experience as this. But one who is assured of salvation by the witness of the Holy Spirit would not require to be warned against apostasy while in this state of assurance.

Such exhortations and warnings are also consistent with the perseverance of the believer because (b) exhortations to struggle with sin and warnings against its insidious and dangerous nature are one of the means employed by the Holy Spirit to secure perseverance. The decree of election includes the means as well as the end. Now if success in the use of means is certain, there is the strongest motive to employ them; but if success is uncertain, then there is little motive to use them. St. Paul employs the certainty of success as a motive to struggle: 'Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life, whereunto you are called' (I Tim. 6:12)."⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ John MacArthur, *The Truth War* (Thomas Nelson, 2007) p. 44.

² Adapted from *The Works of John Owen* VII (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1974) cf. also URL to article: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2010/05/03/help-for-hurting-churches-in-dealing-with-apostasy/>

³ Historically it has one of the key features of Arminianism to advocate a *losable* salvation. More recently, representatives of the Federal Vision (who claim to be 'Reformed') are also advancing this Arminian distinctive. For example, Rich Lusk contends that all covenant children who receive the sacrament of baptism are "really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ's blood, and really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit." With regard to the Lord's Supper, the emphasis is, once again, on sacramental objectivity. Because baptized children are understood to have already received initial saving grace, the practice of paedocommunion is often encouraged in FV circles. Because the enjoyment of the benefits of the covenant is conditional on perseverance in faith and obedience and because of a robust doctrine of baptismal grace, considerable attention has been paid to the dynamics of perseverance and apostasy. Rich Lusk has argued at length that the warnings against apostasy in the NT are real rather than hypothetical, and that it is possible for those who are genuinely united with Christ in baptism to fall from grace. In order to account for this while still maintaining a role for divine sovereignty, Lusk posits a separate grace of perseverance given only to the elect. Here, rather clearly the unity of salvation in Christ has been compromised in that union with Christ does not necessarily entail the grace of perseverance. See W. B. Evans, "Déjà Vu all over again? The Contemporary Reformed Soteriological Controversy in Historical Perspective." *The Westminster Theological Journal* (Vol. 72, No. 1, Spring 2010) p. 144. The position Rich Lusk is espousing, John Owen saw as part of the problem of apostasy. "From this influx, it is not surprising that the doctrines of faith and, most especially, that of the new birth became so rapidly corrupted in the churches. With separation from the world spurned, there is no wonder that the sanctity and glory of the gospel was overshadowed, and superstitious practices flooded in along with the unconverted pagans, until, at length, Christian church discipline was remodeled on the fashion of the pagan secular state. Once hypocrites and other unregenerate people began, as it were, to swamp and overwhelm the believers, there soon emerged leaders who were pleased enough to accommodate spiritual doctrines to the prevailing systems of philosophy. And so it came about that faith was neglected, doctrine no longer studied, *regeneration equated to the mechanical performance of the rite of baptism*, truth and piety no longer defended by any great efforts in the assemblies and councils, the majorities at best indifferent, at worst bitterly hostile, to the total overshadowing of these essential things. By that time, most of the world had taken up the Christian profession so, at most, everything that had been instituted by Christ had been basely transmuted into another gospel. Strange to tell, it was done without a protest or major split in the Church." J. Owen *Biblical Theology* (Soli Deo Gloria 1994) p. 660.

⁴ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Third edition, P & R, 2002) p. 805.