

What is Apostasy?

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Hebrews 10:25-27

What is apostasy? It is a making shipwreck of the faith (1 Tim. 1:19). It is the heart's departure from the living God (Heb. 3:12). It is a returning to and being overcome by the world, after a previous escape from its pollutions through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 2:20).

There are various steps which precede it. First, there is a looking back (Luke 9:62), like Lot's wife, who though she had outwardly left Sodom, yet her heart was still there. Second, there is a drawing back (Heb. 10:38): the requirements of Christ are too exacting to any longer appeal to the heart. Third, there is a turning back (John 6:66): the path of godliness is too narrow to suit the lustings of the flesh. Fourth, there is a falling back, which is fatal: "that they might go and fall backward and be broken" (Isa. 28:13).

"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some, but exhorting; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (verse 25). This verse forms the transition between the subject of Christian perseverance, treated of in verses 23, 24, and that of apostasy, which is developed in verse 26 and onwards, though it is much more closely related to the latter than to the former. Most of the commentators are astray on this point, through failing to observe the absence of the word "And" at the beginning of it, and because they perceive not the significance of the word "forsake." In reality, the contents of this verse form a faithful warning against apostasy. First, the Hebrews are cautioned against forsaking public worship. Second, it is pointed out that "some" had already done so. Third, they are bidden to exhort one another with increased diligence. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." Before attempting exposition of these words, let us first relieve them of a false application which some seek to make of them today. Just as of old Satan made a wrong

use of Psalm 91:11, 12 in his tempting of the Savior (Matthew 4:6), so he does with the verse before us. Few are aware of how often the Devil brings a Scripture before our minds. When a Christian is seeking to be out and out for Christ, the Devil will quote to him "Be not righteous overmuch" (Ecclesiastes 7:16); likewise when a child of God resolves to obey 2 Timothy 3:5 and Hebrews 13:13 and separate from all who do not live godly, the Enemy reminds him of "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." Romanists used the same text in the early days of the Reformation and charged Luther and his friends with disobeying this Divine command. But God's Word does not contradict itself: it does not tell us in one place "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14), and here bid the "sheep" to fraternize with "goats." When rightly understood, this verse affords no handle to those who seek to discourage faithfulness to Christ.

"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." John Owen rightly pointed out that, "There is a synecdoche (a part put for the whole) in the word 'assembling,' and it is put for the whole worship of Christ, because worship was performed in their assemblies; and he that forsakes the assemblies, forsakes the worship of Christ, as some of them did when exposed to danger." What is exhorted here is the total relinquishment of Christianity. It is not "Cease not to attend the assembly," but "forsake not," abandon not the assembling of yourselves together. It is not the sin of sloth or of schism which is here considered, but that of apostasy. If a professing Christian forsook the Christian churches and became a Mohammedan he would disobey this verse; but for one who puts the honor of Christ before everything else, to turn his back upon the so-called churches where He is now so grievously dishonored, is not a failure to comply with its terms. The Greek word for "Forsake not" is a very strong and emphatic one, being a double compound, and signifies "to abandon in time of danger." It is the word used by the agonizing Redeemer on the Cross, when He cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" It was used by Him again when He declared, "Thou wilt not leave My soul in hell, neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:27). It is the word employed by

Paul in 2 Timothy 4:10, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." It is found in only one other place in this epistle, where it is in obvious antithesis from the verse now before us: "He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5). Thus it will appear that a total and final abandonment of the public profession of Christianity is what is here warned against. One may therefore discern how that verse 25 supplies a most appropriate link between verses 23, 24 and verse 26. Verse 25 prescribes another means to enable the wavering Hebrews to remain constant in the Christian faith.

If they were to "hold fast the confession of faith without wavering," and if they were to "consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works," then they must not "forsake the assembling" of themselves together. The word for "assembling together" is a double compound, and occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 2 Thessalonians 2:1: "our gathering together unto Him," that is unto Christ; this also shows that the "assembling together" here is under one Head, and that the "forsaking" is because He has been turned away from. To enforce the above caution, the apostle adds, "as the manner of some is." The Greek word for "manner" signifies "custom," and is so translated in Luke 2:42. This supplies additional confirmation that the evil against which the Hebrews were exhorted was no mere occasionally absenting themselves from the Christian churches, but a deliberate, fixed and final departure from them. In John 6:66 we read that "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him"; John also wrote of those who "went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John 2:19); whilst at the close of his labors Paul had to say "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). So here, some who had made a profession of the Christian faith had now abandoned the same and gone back to Judaism. It was to warn the others against this fatal step that the apostle now wrote as he did—compare 1 Corinthians 10:12, Romans 11:20.

"But exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." Here is the positive side of our verse. This is another of the means appointed by God to confirm Christians in their holy confession. To "exhort one another" is a duty to which all Christians are called; alas, how rarely is it performed these evil days. Yet, from the human side, such failure is hardly to be wondered at. The vast majority of professing Christians wish to be petted and flattered, rather than exhorted and cautioned. Most of them are so hypersensitive that the slightest criticism offends them. One who seeks grace to be faithful and to act in true "love" to those whom he supposes are his brethren and sisters in Christ, has a thankless task before him, so far as man is concerned—he will soon lose nearly all his "friends" (?) and sever the "fellowship" (?) which exists between him and them. But this will only give a little taste of "the fellowship of His sufferings." Hebrews 3:13 is still God's command!

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