

What Is Apostasy?

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I've heard people talk about apostasy. What is it?

The word “apostasy” comes from the Greek *apostasía*, which means “rebellion.” In Scripture it has a religious content worth exploring. In Christian theology the reformers used it to describe the condition of the church during the Middle Ages. But it has also become important among those who promote double predestination, the notion that some have been chosen by God for salvation and others for destruction. It is argued that those elected for salvation will never fall from grace; they will not apostatize. I cannot deal here with the details of those claims, but I will describe some aspect of the concept of apostasy in Scripture.

1. Apostasy and Heresy: It is important to distinguish between apostasy and heresy as religious terms. Heresy is commonly understood as a deviation from, or falsification of, biblical truth. It presupposes that a biblical body of truth is valid for all and that no one has the right or authority to alter it. It also assumes that there is a criterion to distinguish truth from its falsification or deviation.

In Christian history two specific instruments have been credited with that authority. The first was the teaching ministry of the Christian church. That is to say, the church through its religious leaders interpreted and defined truth for believers. This understanding was rejected by the reformers.

The second instrument is Scripture. The Bible is the only and exclusive instrument by which truth is defined and falsehood identified. Adventists have embraced this last position. Apostasy incorporates the view of heresy just summarized, but points to the moment when the presence of heresy is so abundant and radical that individuals are considered to be fully separated from biblical truth, and from Christ as the truth. In that case there is a falling away from the truth and from God’s saving grace. Apostasy is the result of a slow process of spiritual defection from biblical truth.

2. Terminology Associated With Apostasy: The Bible uses many verbs to express the idea of apostasy. Among them, “turn away” (Matt. 24:10), “go out” (1 John 2:19), “forsake” (Deut. 31:16), and “rebel” (Eze. 2:3). The Hebrew term closest to our term “apostasy” is *m^eshûbah*. It is based on the verb *shûb*, which means “to turn.” This verb is used, on one hand, to express the idea of repentance as a “turning” or “re-turning” to the Lord. On the other hand a person who “turns away” from the Lord commits *m^eshûbah*, apostasy. Apostasy could be the result of accepting the spurious beliefs of false teachers (1 Tim. 4:1) or going back to the corrupting lifestyle of the world (2 Peter 2:20-22). It could also be the result of persecution (Matt. 24:9, 10), an unbelieving heart (Heb. 3:12), superficial commitment to Christ (1 John 2:19), and not paying attention to God’s Word (Heb. 2:1).

3. Manifestations of Apostasy: When associated with heresy, apostasy is a visible rejection of truth. The Bible emphasizes two of its most common expressions. The first is the practice of false worship (Jer. 3:6). The true God is rejected or worshipped in the style of a pagan god. This was a common expression of apostasy in the Old Testament and was considered a violation of the covenant. The prevailing Canaanite religion exerted a powerful

influence upon many Israelites, and this led to separation from the Lord. For the Lord this was a case of spiritual marital unfaithfulness resulting in permanent separation (Jer. 3:6-8).

The second expression of apostasy was relying for preservation on the political power of other nations, thus, denying the power of God for salvation (e.g., Hosea 8:9). In doing this, the nation was “forsaking the Lord,” acting wickedly, going back to the slavery of Egypt, and turning against Him (Jer. 2:17-19). In both cases God was abandoned and new powers were embraced by His people. Surprisingly, most probably through self-deception, they still believed they were being loyal to the Lord (e.g., Jer. 3:23, 24). These are probably two of the most deceptive and disastrous expressions of apostasy. It promotes falsehood in the name of the Lord, and consequently many are deceived.

Although apostasy will increase in the Christian world (2 Thess. 2:3), through the power of the Lamb we can remain loyal to Him.

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