



A “Bad” Christian vs. an “Apostate” Christian

²⁴“But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die.

— Ezekiel 18:24

⁴For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

— Hebrews 6:4-8

Setting aside that these verses are a strong refutation of the concept of “once saved, always saved”, we have entered a time when it is essential that we be able to distinguish between someone who has “fallen away” — that is, was once authentically saved but has now permanently walked away from Christ, and someone who is simply a “bad” Christian who is more in the character of the Prodigal Son— temporarily backslidden and can be restored. All too often it can be observed in online postings that someone who is probably and justifiably identified with sinful behavior is categorized as never having been saved in the first place. We seem to forgo the possibility that someone can be authentically saved and on the path to falling away from the faith or simply just a “bad” Christian.

Most often what is quoted as proof of having never been saved in the first place is the lack of the fruit of the Spirit as listed in Galatians 5:22-23 for the incident being reported. As discussed at length in [The Greater Scriptural Meaning of Fruit](#), there is much more to spiritual fruit than what is provided in Galatians 5. But it is most certain that someone could observe us in one of our unfortunate but temporary embraces of fleshly behavior— such as when I yell at the fast-food order taker because he forgot my fries— and without a doubt conclude that the qualities of Galatians 5 are completely absent from that incident. But it would be incorrect to conclude, therefore, I had never been born again in the first place. If I began to treat everyone like that it would warrant further observation to determine if I was on the path to permanently falling away from the faith, otherwise in this case I was simply a “bad” Christian and can repent. There is a difference between temporary lapses and embracing a perpetual lifestyle.

I know a prominent Christian figure whose public treatment of others at various times has led to many in his equally vocal opposition to declare that he was never born again in the first place and therefore is exempt from being treated as a Christian. Never mind that if he were truly unsaved it still would not justify their own heaping of abuse on him, the possibility of his being a “bad” or backslidden Christian is never considered in the least.

While I wholly agree with the documented cases of his ill-behavior, and have had to separate from him personally because of this issue, I take great offense at the notion he was never born again to begin with. I cannot count the number of times we took a meal break together and he spent our time in the restaurant witnessing to the food server, or the number of people who came forward to him after a sermon whom he led to the Lord, or the work he has accomplished in Third World countries with the most oppressed and rejected of the greatest of the under-privileged. My point is that we must entertain the possibility of temporary lapses or instances of just plain bad behavior that do not cancel out everything else.

We seem to forget there is a difference between appearing before the “*thronos*”— the final judgment seat for unbelievers before being sent to hell, and the “*bema*”— the judgment seat for Christians which filters out our life’s deeds so as to reward us as we enter into heaven. It is possible that some of our incidents of ill behavior are going to impact our overall heavenly rewards rather than serve to send us to the Lake of Fire.

¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. ¹⁴If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

— 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

More times than not, we are probably observing a **work** that will be burned up, not the inevitable burning of the whole person in eternity. But imagine if your Christianity was judged solely upon those occasions when you “lost your religion” with someone, so to speak? (Thank God you all haven’t been passengers in my car when I’ve been cut off in Los Angeles freeway traffic.)

Variations of “Fall Away”

But what about those who **are** falling away?

It is unfortunate when someone takes for granted that a repeated English word or phrase means the exact, same thing in every instance. It is mainly an issue that plagues the translation of every language to another and is not unique to just English and Greek or Hebrew. The translators are not incorrect but could be a little more helpful in supplying the differences between the underlying Greek terms. It is therefore up to us to peek under the hood, which does not require formal linguistic training but a concordance that connects each instance to the correct corresponding entry in our Greek lexicon.

“Parapipto”

⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have **fallen away**, [*“parapipto”*, #3895] it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

— Hebrews 6:5-6

This is the only instance in all of Scripture— whether in the New Testament or the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament— where this particular Greek word is employed. It consists of two parts: “*para*”, which means to the side of something, and “*pipto*”, conveying the meaning to fall away or aside from something. Both components display these qualities in the context of not just error but abandonment of the faith. This word in its form as a noun— “*paptoma*” #3900— means fault, lapse, error, mistake, or wrongdoing.

So, what exactly is this serious “lapse” or setting aside? How can we tell if it is present in someone? It was most likely just listed in the previous verses which provide the following “*elementary teaching about the Christ*” (Heb. 6:1):

- “*repentance from dead works*” (v.1)
- “*faith toward God*” (v.1)
- “*instruction about washings*” (v.2)
- “*laying on of hands*” (v.2)
- “*the resurrection of the dead*” (v.2)
- “*eternal judgment*” (v.2)

Such practitioners of “*parapipto*” will display a corruption or outright abandonment of these foundational doctrines of the faith. Salvation, faith, baptism, or final judgment become twisted into an aberrant form or completely forsaken in such an individual. They have fallen away from the essential doctrines of biblical Christian orthodoxy.

“Skandalizo”

“*At that time many will **fall away** [*“skandalizo”*, #4624] and will betray one another and hate one another.*”

— Matthew 24:10

This is very different from “*parapipto*” in that its chief meaning is to become a trap or stumblingblock to someone. In other words, they no longer support their fellow Christians but instead seek to make them fall from their own faith as well. The best example of this in Scripture is Balaam, who was prevented by God from cursing Israel, but devised a plan by which the Israelites would stumble out of favor with God by providing an opportunity for them to sin.

This is describing someone who crosses over to become an outright enemy of the cross and uses their previous good-standing identity as a Christian to now undermine the faith of Christians still in right standing with the Lord. Notice the things they will do in Matthew 24:9-14. Their chief characteristics are to not just betray us, but actually hate us. This is explained further in v.12 that their abandonment of putting God’s Word into practice results in their “love”— their “*agape*”— growing cold. This is the unconditional love that is only possible for someone born again of Christ, thus further indicating that those experiencing “*skandalizo*” were at one time authentically saved.

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But as we enter into the Last Days, those who were “*parapipto*”, or essentially walking away doctrinally, will turn “*skandalizo*” so as to act as a stumblingblock to everyone else’s faith in Christ.

“Apostasia”

*³Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the **apostasy** [“apostasia”, #646] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,
— 2 Thessalonians 2:3*

This term refers to a spiritual departure and is provided in the context of the onset of the Antichrist revealing himself to the world.

Ironically, this term is used to incorrectly characterize the Apostle Paul’s teaching, accusing him of causing ethnic Jews to depart from the teachings of Moses.

*and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to **forsake** Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.
— Acts 21:21*

In either case, that which is being referred to is not just a spiritual departure from something the person originally believed, but from a previous lifestyle.

We cannot help but see a natural progression in these terms which begins by abandoning fundamental doctrine, becoming an active stumblingblock to those still holding to their faith in Christ, to completely departing in order to wholly embrace the Antichrist. These three Greek terms each describe a different aspect of “falling away” as rendered in English, and although related, are not precisely identical. Someone can fall away from the doctrines of the faith, or become an active stumblingblock to those still holding to their faith, or ultimately cross over to the other spiritual end of the spectrum from Christ to Antichrist.

Dealing with These Conditions

First, we can see why it is critical to not only defend the fundamentals of the faith, but to be sensitive to when someone who once embraced them in their purest biblical form begins to actively corrupt them, or even worse, dismiss them outright. This is going to lead to the lawlessness that is at the root of becoming someone who sets traps so as to upend others’ faith.

Second, by not addressing the issue, we are allowing someone to take up residence among the Body of Christ who will eventually do everything they can to cause our own falling away, even resorting to betrayal. They will still be operating among us as their love transforms into hatred. At the worst possible time, when the whole world has turned against us, they will undermine us in order to multiply our trials.

Finally, there is the complete departure in the shadow of the public appearance of the ultimate enemy of Christ. The work of the Antichrist becomes their work. When the Antichrist appears, we will witness many publicly cross over to his side from within the Church.

But the worst aspect of all of this is that it comes by the hand of those who were once authentically born again. They are not outsiders who try to infiltrate us, or complete strangers who simply hate us because they hate God, but friends and family. It comes as an unchecked corruption of God's Word and "agape" love that crosses a line of no return.

The common denominator which visibly betrays each of these conditions is their deeds or their actions. Or as it is expressed in Hebrews:

but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.
— Hebrews 6:8

Each of these conditions of "falling away" are not just characterized as lacking spiritual fruit but producing the exact opposite in "thorns and thistles". When an authentically saved person's life is not just lacking fruit (a metaphor for spiritual sustenance) and just a harmful substitute, the process of falling away becomes evident.

Dressed & Ready

It is interesting that in the *Parable of the Wedding Feast*, someone shows up who was temporarily allowed inside until their lack of appropriate "wedding clothes" disqualified them. Clean and unclean clothes is a repeated biblical metaphor for good and bad deeds.

*¹¹"But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was **not dressed in wedding clothes**, ¹²and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless.*
¹³"Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen."
— Matthew 22:11-14

Apparently, Jesus is providing a warning to the authentically saved who fall away that they will briefly possess firsthand knowledge of what it is they had and lost before being consigned to hell. Imagine undergoing this experience and then having to remember it for all eternity in the exact, opposite place you thought you would never visit.

²⁴"Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.'
²⁶"Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; ²⁷and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.'

28 "In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out.

— Luke 13:24-28

In many cases, those falling away may still feel an attachment to Christ, particularly as time runs out. Even though they have abandoned putting His teachings into practice, they feel as if their proximity to Christ was close enough to warrant inclusion in His kingdom regardless of how they lived. Like the guest without the wedding clothes, they will only fully realize such consequences when it is too late.

The Other Side

However, let's never forget that a single incident, or even series of incidents, does not necessarily portend a full and permanent departing from Christ, and especially is a poor barometer for determining if someone was authentically saved in the first place. Sooner or later we all fail at some point. Saved Christians can temporarily act like the unsaved; there can be lapses in our behavior and even temporary deviations in our understanding of doctrine. We must distinguish between the temporarily backslidden and the permanent embrace of an alternative lifestyle.

Sometimes, all we can really do is address the specific issue that is before us. Just because I have been mistreated does not automatically translate to that person therefore treating everyone that way. (Why do she hate just me?) Especially when it comes to a public figure whom we do not personally know and therefore have no personal knowledge of the rest of their deeds, we need to show some restraint.

Eventually God reveals the whole truth about someone like a Bill Johnson or a Benny Hinn, whose private lives have been exposed by former friends, co-workers, and even family members so that a more complete picture can be clearly seen. But in truth we should know such figures by their horrible mangling of God's Word which confirmed them as false teachers to begin with. But often times we treat someone in the course of their single sin or error as if they are the equivalent of these false figures.

I think this is why the Matthew 18 process is so essential, because it requires us to personally confront the person in private, following up in private with an eye witness, and then not taking it to the whole world but just before the Church. If there is too much distance between us to make that possible, we are not given a license to go onto the Internet and say whatever we please but be even more mindful of how we address the issue. Now the whole world is watching and we do not really know the whole truth about that person's deeds nor have we actually confronted them first. We need to address the issue by comparing it to Scripture and limiting our commentary to just that particular thing rather than seeing it as a license to unload on them. We must always remember...

- Speak the truth in love.
- Vengeance is Mine, says the Lord.
- Do not return evil with evil.
- Love your enemies.
- Before his own master a servant stands or falls.

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We are not the Judge nor even the Jury, but merely those who attempt to coax them back to where they belong.

In Him,

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[Note: For a much more detailed treatise on this subject, see the author's book, [Biblical Conflict Management](#).]