

Once Saved, Always Saved?

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There are two major views about the security of a believer among Bible believing people. There are Christians who hold that once a person is truly saved, God makes him eternally secure and God makes that person's security evident by giving him or her a transformed life by the power of the Holy Spirit (an obedient life) that lasts until the end of his or her life.ⁱ The other major view comes from those believers who hold that once a person is truly saved, God empowers him to live a transformed life, but it is still possible to resist the Holy Spirit and turn away from God and become lost.ⁱⁱ These Christians do not believe that we are saved one day and lost the next, but they do believe that a genuine Christian can reach the point, over time, where he or she has turned away from Christ and forfeited salvation. They believe that we must strive to "keep the faith" lest we become weakened to the point where we turn away from Jesus Christ.

The faith statement at Harpeth Community Church (HCC) explicitly supports both positions because we focus upon living the faithful life which God teaches us to live in the Bible. Those without a transformed life (allowing for the growth of immature faith and struggles with sin) either we were never truly saved in the first place or we were once genuine believers, but have abandoned the faith. Regardless of the theological understanding, people at HCC from both camps believe that those who claim to be Christians but participate in lifestyles of disobedience are in eternal peril. We are gravely concerned about the following behaviors (and others) by people who claim to be Christians:

- A person stops attending church all together.
- A person becomes sexually immoral.
- A person divorces and remarries without biblical grounds.
- A person enters a lifestyle of drunkenness or drugs.
- A person's life begins to revolve around the love of money.
- A person's relationships are overcome by bitterness and hatred.

These people are in grave spiritual danger because they are living in rebellion to the teachings of Jesus in the Bible. The danger is that they are on a path that is leading to apostasy (turning from Christ) or they were never truly saved in the first place. We have concern for them because we believe that only the faithful are truly saved.

At the same time, there is a view that we explicitly reject. It is the view that *once you are saved, you are always saved, regardless of how you live*. This popular belief is a dangerous and false one. The Bible teaches that, in the absence of a transformed life, the claim to be a Christian is false (Matthew 7:21-23). Not only does this popular belief give false comfort to many who claim to be Christians, but it calls into question the moral influence of Christianity as a whole. Salvation in this scheme, we are falsely told, is granted because it is totally by grace, not by works. So, some say, a person can be saved without any good works. But this is a major distortion of the biblical teaching on grace. What the Bible actually teaches is that we are saved "by grace, through faith" (Eph. 2:8-9). This biblical formula has two parts: God's grace and the human response of faith. We contend that a healthy understanding of this formula is necessary to understand what the Bible actually teaches.

Can You Lose Your Salvation?

While I share fellowship with brothers and sisters at HCC who believe in the classic understanding of “once saved, always saved” (because they believe that we can know the saved by their transformed life), I believe that the Bible teaches that a person can have a genuine saving faith and then give it up. I am writing this article to describe my personal belief, not to represent the broader beliefs of HCC (described above). I find the belief that a Christian can lose his or her salvation through apostasy to be the one which is most consistent with scripture. New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall states what I believe when he writes, “If people wish to attain to final salvation, they must persevere in faith, and only at the end will it be seen whether they persevered.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I believe that the overall teaching of the New Testament assumes that Christians will persevere (because of God’s help), but it also teaches that a true Christian can resist God’s empowering presence, turn from the faith, and thereby be lost. I believe this concept is taught throughout the New Testament. For some clear examples of such a teaching, consider the following two sections of scripture.

Hebrews 6:4-6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Hebrews 10:26-31 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

It is hard to believe that these passages in Hebrews describe anything other than genuine Christians who turn from Christ and fall away from the faith:^{iv}

-They have 1) been enlightened, 2) tasted the heavenly gift, 3) shared in the Holy Spirit, 4) tasted the goodness of the Word of God, and 5) the powers of the coming age (6:4-5)

-They have 1) received knowledge of the truth and have 2) been sanctified by the blood of the covenant (10:26,30).

The highly respected Hebrew's scholar William Lane describes their status: "God's presence and salvation are the undoubted reality of their lives."^v But this passage warns that if they abandon their faith in Christ, they will face the eternal punishment of unbelievers. Again, Lane puts it succinctly when he writes that this passage, "affirms the magnitude of the sin of apostasy and of the impending judgment from which there is no escape."^{vi}

Apostasy is the sin of turning away from Christ. I do not see how these passages in Hebrews can be interpreted authentically (and in context) without affirming that it is possible to turn from Christ and forfeit our salvation. To help you to understand what it means to "become an apostate" and "fall away," it is important to gain a bigger perspective on what the New Testament teaches. Join with me by reading the material below, as I hope it will help you see this teaching in the broader contours of the Bible.

The "By Grace, Through Faith" Formula

The Bible teaches that we can only get right with God if we will place our faith in Christ (Romans 3:23-25). The fact that Christ died does not save people, in and of itself, but it provides the ground or basis upon which God, in full harmony with His holiness, can save those who have sinned against him. Christ was punished on the cross for our sins. Now, what is required for us to do to establish a basis for our freedom and guiltlessness before God? Absolutely nothing is required. It is offered as a free gift. This is what the Bible teaches when it says that we are saved by grace.

However, there is a condition if we are to receive God's grace. This free gift can only be received if we will place our *faith* in Christ. The Bible describes this for us with clarity in Ephesians 2:8-10.

For by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

God provides the offer of his Grace, but humans must accept it through faith. As A.T. Robertson, the expert on New Testament Greek, puts it: "Grace is God's part, faith ours."^{vii} Faith springs from God, yet it is our "submissive trust" - the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to him as savior and leader. Faith should never be understood as earning salvation - but, as we will see - genuine faith always leads to good works. Stated differently, good works result from the kind of faith that brings salvation. Good works reveal the presence of genuine faith and salvation. Likewise, evil deeds reveal a problem with one's faith. To help make this teaching clear, it is important to understand the nature of saving faith.

Faith and Faithfulness

"Faith" is the key word in the human side of our relationship with God. "Faith," "belief" and "trust" are all similar words in the Bible. The Bible says the entire Christian life is lived by faith:

“This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life’” (Romans 1:17, NLT).

Biblical faith is holistic; when it is present, it transforms lives.^{viii} The Bible says, “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is a living reality that transforms the mind, the heart, and the will.

First, faith is a mental belief in the facts of the Bible (rational assent). We believe that Jesus Christ came to earth to show us the way and to save us. In our minds, we rationally believe what the Bible says about him. As thoughtful people, we base our eternal destiny upon the historical truth of Christ’s death and resurrection. (1 Corinthians 15:1-8).

Secondly, faith is a personal reliance (personal, existential). We personally rely upon and trust – in our personal, subjective selves - that Christ is our savior (John 3:16-18; 36). We rely not just on Christ’s work on the cross, but on the leadership he gives to us through the Bible and through the indwelling presences of his Holy Spirit. True faith is in the heart.

And, just as importantly, faith is a surrender of our wills (volitional commitment). We surrender ourselves to God through Christ’s leadership, committing ourselves to repentance and the determination to follow Christ in all things (Acts 2:38; Mark 8:34-38). By faith we commit to be submissive to what God teaches. If we do not follow through on Christ’s teachings, there is something wrong with our faith. Consider these words from the book of James:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead ... As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14–26)

This is why the Bible does not recognize faith apart from obedience. Jesus himself said it plainly: Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21). True faith leads to a life lived toward obedience and aimed away from sin. Such good deeds do not earn salvation, but they reveal the presence of genuine faith and a true, “by grace through faith” relationship with God.

John MacArthur has articulated the Biblical balance properly with these fitting words: “Faith obeys. Unbelief rebels. The fruit of one’s life reveals whether that person is a believer or an unbeliever.”^{ix} The Bible describes it this way: “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2: 3-4). William Booth, the Bible believing founder of the Salvation Army, described it this way: “Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again -- until they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other.”^x

At HCC, we regularly say that faith is a “submissive trust.” We believe that if someone claims to be a Christian and truly lives with a submissive trust in Christ and Christ’s teaching,

then he or she is a true Christian. And we will continue to accept that this person is right with God as long as he or she maintains a life characterized by “submissive trust.” In the absence of the fruit of a “submissive trust” in Christ we are concerned. We know that something serious is lacking.

A lack of church involvement or sexual immorality or a lifestyle of drug usage does not, in and of itself, put us in eternal peril (as an external action). The heart of the person who does these things is the center of the problem. Regardless of his or her words, such a person is struggling with submission to Jesus Christ and his teachings. We must not focus as much on the actions (which remain centrally important), but on the deeper “heart issues” that result in such actions. A hardness of heart to God’s teachings is the down side of the slow death of faith. This death is revealed by actions which are inconsistent with faith.

God’s Sustaining Power and Security

Let’s make sure that we also establish the scriptural basis of the security in what God provides. The Bible teaches that through the Holy Spirit, God leads us to place our faith in Christ (John 16:7-11). We can resist the Holy Spirit, as people did in the Bible (Acts 7:51-53). But when we choose to submit to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, he confirms the truth of Christ within our inner beings (1 John 2:20-27). After we believe, God gives us his indwelling Spirit as the deposit (down payment) for our eternal life with him (Eph. 1:13-14). God continues to work to protect us and enable us to persevere. God has promised to keep us safe – no force, no circumstance, not even Satan himself, can snatch us out of God’s hand.

John 10:27-29 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

As Christians, we are the sheep who listen to Christ and follow him by faith. We cannot be snatched away. We are secure in God – he is always doing his part to strengthen us, protect us from the evil one, and keep us safe. But this passage (and others like it) does not eliminate our free will. The Bible teaches that we can walk away from the protection God provides. Satan cannot snatch us, but we have the free will to turn away from God and reject God’s sustaining power by turning away from Christ.

The Bible teaches that we are responsible for our moral choices (Luke 17:1-3). If we were not responsible for them, then God would not be fair in punishing us for our disobedience. But God is fair (Rom. 2:3-7). Because we are ultimately responsible for our choices, we possess free will. And if we have genuine freedom, then we can even choose, over time, to turn away from the protection God provides and leave him. God’s grace is something that can be “resisted” (Acts 7:51), the spirit’s fire can be “put out” (1 Thess. 5:19), we can get “hardened” in rebellion, and we can turn away from God (Heb. 3: 7-14). And so the Bible warns us that by God’s power we must be faithful, lest our names be blotted out from the “book of life” (Rev. 3:5; Psalm 69:19). In short, God provides protection and God influences us for good, but God does not take away our freewill.

The Danger of Falling Away

The Biblical teaching on God’s sustaining power in our lives, therefore, must also be balanced with our Christian responsibility. Jesus shows how the two work together in the gospel of John.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. (John 15:1–6)

Jesus is the vine and we (his disciples) are branches that *will bear fruit* if they remain attached to the vine. The fruit that Jesus is talking about in this context is obedience to his commands, especially the command to love people. If there is no fruitfulness, God will cut people off. They will be thrown into the fire (2,6), surely a reference to hell.

The key to our security in Christ is that we continue to “remain in Christ.” God provides all that we need to be saved, but we must stay in relationship with God (on the vine) and, by faith, we must bear the fruit of a changed life. Without a transformed life – by God’s power – we cannot “remain in Christ.” Something is wrong within us; our actions show that we are turning or have turned away from faith. We are in danger of hell – by being “thrown into the fire and burned.”

The Paths of Apostasy

Apostasy is a word used to describe someone who forfeits Christ’s salvation because they have fatally turned away from “saving faith” in him. No person can know, for sure, when someone has crossed the line, but God knows. Such persons may still claim to believe, but they do not have a submissive belief. The biblical balance teaches that God gives his grace and protection so that we will remain with him. But we must continue to follow God by faith. Obedience does not bring salvation, but it is the inevitable result of genuine faith. From the Bible itself, I see three general paths which can lead to a termination of genuine faith.^{xi}

1. The death of faith by sin’s strangulation.

A prominent danger to the survival of true faith is the active, ongoing practice of sin. Every Christian is engaged in a life-long struggle with sin, but the Bible warns us that deliberate and ongoing sin – as a conscious choice – can lead to the death of faith and, consequently, to apostasy. This person’s will is in rebellion against God’s teaching. The book of Hebrews describes the basic principle.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. (Hebrews 10:26,27)

According to this passage the key characteristic of those in danger is that they “*deliberately keep on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth.*”^{xii} This passage is not saying that a Christian cannot sin. Every Christian struggles with sin, giving in to its power in one area or another (James 3:2). But this passage teaches that giving in to a *lifestyle of deliberate and continual pattern of sin* is a different matter entirely. Such behavior rejects Jesus Christ and genuine faith in him as the next few verses show (Hebrews 10:28-31).

. . . do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The deliberate and ongoing practice of a sinful lifestyle hardens the heart to God and leads to a struggle with true, submissive faith in Christ. A “Faith” that does not continue in a “pattern of faithfulness” is not saving faith.

One big sin or one small sin is not a problem because the Bible teaches that God provides forgiveness to those with ongoing faith (1 John 1:7-9). The problem is a rebellious, unbelieving heart that is reflected in ongoing actions. This often starts with major sins like divorce for an affair, which is not one sin, but a series of pre-meditated sins, reflecting serious problem in the heart of faith. Hebrews 3:12-14 describes it perfectly:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

The clearest related passage is Galatians 5:19–21. Here the apostle Paul explicitly lists lifestyles that characterize those living in rebellion.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This passage lists for us the types of *lifestyles* (“those who live like this”) which give evidence that a Christian is being hardened to God and not living with an active and submissive faith. This passage serves as a warning to Christians, ancient and modern. People who live this way turn their backs on Christ by their lifestyles.

The Bible teaches that it is better to have never become a Christian than to become one and turn your back on Christ.

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud." (2 Peter 2:20,21).

This concern is why the book of James says, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19,20).

Once again, it is important to provide balance. A person who embraces an actively sinful lifestyle is in danger of apostasy because his heart is hardening to God and he is no longer surrendering his will to Christ. If such a person claims to be a Christian, we must recognize the root problem: this person's faith is in the pleasures of this world rather than in Christ. They are living in active rebellion against what the Bible teaches. When such an attitude of rebellion to God's ways develops, it creates a mindset or an attitude that will be demonstrated in disobedient behavior.

Such an attitude of internal rebellion can become entrenched. This rebellious heart was revealed in the lives of King Saul and King Solomon in the Old Testament. The Bible warns us that a believer's heart may even become so hardened in rebellion that the hardness can mean that he or she may never truly turn back God (Hebrews 6:1-6). God is always willing to accept us back, when we truly repent, no matter what we have done. But we must be careful that our heart does not get so hard, that we do not want to come back and surrender again with submissive faith in Christ.

Again, this is a point of balance. All Christians struggle with intermittent sin – sometimes in dangerous ways. Such times are perilous and we should be fearful of the consequences. But if a rebellious Christian comes to himself (or herself) and truly repents, he can return to God. God is always like the prodigal son's father, always willing and always waiting to welcome back his children if they will repent and turn back to him (Luke 15:11-32). Again, the problem with entrenched sin in our lives is not God – it is the hardness that develops within our hearts when we continually reject Christ in favor of sin. Sin's strangulation is an especially a big danger for new or immature Christians. This is why Jesus gave us a clear warning in Matt. 18:8: *If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.*

2. The death of weak faith through hardships.

A person can have a weak faith for many reasons, including immaturity and a lack of seeking God. Such people are often in spiritual danger. There is a parable which makes this danger clear. In Luke 8:4–15 Jesus describes seed sown by a farmer. The seed that falls among the rocks represents those who abandon Christ because they have no spiritual depth. The soil is described with these words:

Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. *They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.* (Luke 8:13)

This passage describes Christians who believe, but they do not possess a deep rooted, sustaining faith. During a time of testing, they fall away.^{xiii} These are people who embrace a life of faith, but then run into difficulties. The source of “testing” can be many things. For some it might be struggles with family members or with lifestyle choices or even with general hardships. These people believe, but then they falter and fall away. Stated again, new Christians or those who have been Christians for years without maturing are in particular danger at this point.

Faith requires nurturing and ongoing growth. To establish and develop this kind of faith, we must actively seek God, study the Bible, and be active in church. At the end of his life, even the apostle Paul described the challenge in his life this way: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). If Paul said that he had to strive to “keep the faith,” then surely we must do the same. It is essential that we help each other to grow in the faith. The Bible teaches that we must not only believe in God, but earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6). We must seek God through active efforts (of faith) if we are to make our salvation sure (2 Peter 1:3-10).

3. The death of faith through spiritual suicide.

The third area which displays that a Christian no longer has true faith in Christ is when he or she gives up or renounces the faith. They give up on the gospel. The gospel is the saving work accomplished by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation is promised to anyone who trusts in this gospel, but only *if*, according to Paul, “you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). Here is the essence of the gospel, according to the apostle Paul:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3–8)

The gospel is that upon which we rely when we become Christians. To abandon and no longer believe this foundation is to repudiate and depart from the whole basis of salvation. It is spiritual suicide.

This is not to say (it must be emphasized) that a person must be right on every Biblical doctrine to be saved. Christians must strive to hold the correct point of view on every Biblical doctrine. This is because every part of God’s truth is important and it is all necessary for healthy and effective Christianity. *But not all doctrines are the foundation of salvation.*

The book of Galatians was written to a group of Christians who were in spiritual danger of faith’s suicide because the gospel itself was being jeopardized. Paul warns them about abandoning the gospel.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned. (Galatians 1:6–9)

This is a letter written to Christians who were being influenced to turn from the core teachings of the faith. Paul uses the strongest language possible to warn them not to turn away and forfeit their salvation.

When the entire book of Galatians is examined the real problem is clarified. False teachers were saying that faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ was *not enough*. They were advocating that, to be saved, these gentile Christians had to adopt the practices of ethnic Jews. In doing this, these false teachers had changed the *basis of salvation*.^{xiv} The false teachers held that salvation was not by faith in Jesus but by the practices of circumcision and Judaism. Paul's response and warning about apostasy was clear:

Mark my word! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all . . . You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:2–4)

Paul resorts to such strong words because souls were being put in jeopardy by the teaching that faith in Christ and his cross was not enough. This concept is taught elsewhere in the New Testament (2 John 7-8; 1 Timothy 1:18-2; etc.,).

A Christian can lose his relationship with God if he corrupts or abandons the basic elements of the faith.^{xv} Such matters are of utmost seriousness for us. Spiritual suicide is a danger for those who flirt with or actively embrace the general secularism of our culture (and who live in practical disbelief even though they might claim to be Christians) or by those who consider turning to other religions (such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.,). We must be careful to defend and uphold the faith which God has entrusted to us (Jude 3).

Struggles and Sin For Faithful Christians

The vast majority of people in America claim to be Christians. In an important and well received book entitled *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard calls much of what passes for conversion today as “bar-code faith.”

Think of the bar codes now used on goods in most stores. The scanner responds only to the bar code. It makes no difference what is in the bottle or package that bears it, or whether the sticker is on the “right” one or not . . . there is something about the Christian that works like the bar code. Some ritual, some belief, or some association with a group affects God the way the bar code affects the scanner . . . And the payoff for having faith and being “scanned” comes at death and after. Life now being lived has no necessary connection with being a Christian as long as the “bar code” does its

job . . . it is not necessary to be a good Christian in order to be forgiven. That's the main point of the bar code . . .^{xvi}

Vast numbers of preachers and teachers propagate this false version of faith, telling people that by it “they are saved.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this approach “cheap grace.” God’s provision of “grace” cost him dearly because it required the death of his son. But we treat God’s grace as a “cheap thing” when we say that we will receive the benefits of Christ’s death, but we live like non Christians. As Bonhoeffer put it,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.^{xvii}

What makes this so tragic is the popularity and influence of this idea in North America today. According to a recent surveys, 84 percent of Americans claim to be Christian.^{xviii} “Bar-code faith” is the reason why so many Americans feel that they are “at peace with God,” while they live life on their own terms, without any meaningful semblance of active faithfulness or obedience to Christ.

Too many people have been given a false security and a false sense that they have a “real relationship with God.” Many believe that they are Christians when they have never truly placed their faith in Christ and experienced a biblical conversion experience. And then, again others have experienced a true conversion, but then they have abandoned the true faith given in the Bible. Yet they think they are saved because they “accepted Christ.” We must insist on a healthier path.

We must help one another to truly walk in the light. In the Bible the word “walk” is a common metaphor for the “basic direction of one’s life.” Thus, when a Christian “walks in the way of Jesus” or “walks in the light,” he or she is living with Jesus as both savior and Lord. When this happens salvation remains a certainty. This point is made clear in 1 John 1:5–9

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.* If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

There are three points in this passage which help us to maintain a healthy and balanced perspective.

First, if a person is living in an ongoing, fundamentally sinful way, then this person is living without saving faith. And this person is lying if he or she claims to have fellowship with God. But the opposite is also true: someone who is walking in God’s direction, who is living a responsive, Christ-centered lifestyle can boldly claim genuine faith in Christ, and the ongoing certainty of salvation. In addition to God’s promises, the Bible tells us that our basic lifestyle testifies to our security, because it demonstrates that we are true believers (1 John 5:12-13).

Second, to walk in the light includes the ongoing struggle with sin. Chuck Jones points out what this passage is saying:

“Walking in the light” does not mean, however, that you have ridded yourself of every sinful act. The verse itself makes this clear — one of the two blessings we receive as a result of this walk is that Jesus’ blood “cleanses us from every sin.” That phrase is meaningless if a person is not walking in the light until he has conquered every sin. *Sinning, not as a lifestyle, but as an occasional act, is part of walking in the light.*^{xix}

This is an important concept. As mentioned earlier, all Christians will continue to struggle with sin throughout this life (James 3:2). But the difference is that faithful Christians resist rebellious and ongoing sin. We are to look at the basic direction of our lives, by which we can know that our faith is real and that it is making a difference in our lives.

Third, while we are walking in Christ’s light, the cleansing from sin never stops. Consider again, the words of Chuck Jones.

Here lies the most liberating revelation in the highly liberating verse: the cleansing of Jesus never stops . . . An occasional sin does not stop the cleansing power of Jesus. It is instead the very thing that calls the power into action . . . I’m convinced that whether they know it or not, the majority of committed Christians live their entire lives from the moment of their baptism to the hour of their death without spending one day in danger of hellfire. The cleansing never stops. Only one thing can cause it to cease: my making the premeditated decision to abandon Jesus’ lifestyle, leave all he stands for and rebel against his Lordship.^{xx}

A God-ward direction in our lives authenticates our faith and gives us great reassurance. We know that when we sin, the blood of Christ will continually cleanse us. We are perpetually forgiven, as long as we cling to him by a “submissive trust.” In this way the apostle John teaches us how to know that we are on the path of authentic faith (1 John 5:13).

Summary

I believe that it is a grave theological error to believe in the common understanding of “once saved, always saved” if it means people believe that they will be saved, while they are living in ongoing, rebellious sin or doctrinal error which denies the gospel. Churches and individuals which teach this doctrine are being used by Satan to do great damage to the cause of Christ. I believe that God provides everything for our security -- he draws us to Christ, he builds us up in Christ, he leads us, he protects us, etc.,. (Phil. 2: 12-13). Nothing, not even Satan, can snatch us from God’s hand (John 10: 28-29). But I also believe God has given us true free will -- and because human beings are free, it means that we have freedom by which we can even choose to turn away from a saving relationship with God (Luke 8:13; Galatians 5: 4; 1 Timothy 1: 19-20).

I believe that, by faith, we must continuously strive for a continued authentic faith, which is an “ongoing submissive trust.” I believe that even though we struggle with sin and faithfulness, as long as we maintain an active, submissive trust in Christ, we remain secure. God looks at the heart. The heart is the main source of our actions (Matthew 15:18-19). And I

believe we need each other to encourage and help us to have a heart of faith (Hebrews 3: 12-14; 10: 23-25, etc.,).

This is why the Bible teaches us (Galatians 6:1-2; Matthew 18:15-17) that we must reach out to our brothers and sisters and warn them in the situations described at the beginning of this article and also in situations like the following.

- When a Christian starts attending a church which holds to a false gospel.
- When a Christian becomes involved in a non-Christian religion.
- When a Christian stops reading the Bible, gets sporadic in church attendance, etc.,.
- When a Christian's life revolves around their work, not God.
- When a Christians starts living his or her life as though God did not exist.

We only enter into danger when we deliberately turn away from our faith in Jesus Christ and the lifestyle he has called us to follow (1 John 1:5-2:5), but we can slowly enter into this kind of faith and life. We must watch ourselves and faithfully follow God. This teaching inspires us to reach out in love and help everyone to live their lives on the sure path of a true "submissive trust" in Christ.

Appendix: Common Misleading Affirmations Commonly Stated

1. Statement: "Once you are a child (of God), you never cease to be a child – God would never disinherit his children."

Once you are in a family, you can switch to another family. The Bible says that we were once "children of disobedience and wrath" (Eph. 2:1-3), but we switched families when we became children of God by faith. A child can be disinherited or cut off. Likewise the Bible warns of the danger that by apostasy a Christian would be treated as the "enemy of God" (Heb. 10:26-27). Parents sometimes must disinherit their children (for criminal, rebellious, terrible, and continuous acts). The same is true with God.

2. Statement: "God doesn't erase names from the "Book of Life"

False belief - because the Bible actually warns us that this is possible. See Psalm 69:19 and Revelation 3:5. God sees ahead in time and knows those who will truly finish their lives with active faith in Christ, he has seen it from the creation of the world (Revelation 17:8).

3. Statement: "A Child of God is safe, for 'no one can snatch him out' of Christ's hand." (John 10).

No one can snatch a child out of God's hand. This gives us great peace. But this passage does not address our free will and the need for ongoing faith. We can walk away from Christ's protective hand when we turn from him and reject him.

4. Statement: "The eternal life we received is everlasting life!"

Eternal life is a "quality of present life" as well as an age lasting promise. The apostate has the gift of everlasting life and then turns his back on it. Would God save a non-believer? When a person no longer has faith, the promise is forfeited.

5. Statement: "One who is born again cannot be unborn!"

If a person turns to apostasy, that person does not become unborn – he dies.

6. Statement: "If I have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, how could I become unsealed?"

King David prayed that God would not take the Holy Spirit away from him (Psalm 51:10-12). The New Testament also warns us not to "put out the Spirit's fire." The Spirit is a seal in our lives, but it is nowhere described as an "un-removable seal."

7. Statement: "God is not an Indian-giver!"

God is not an Indian giver – the apostate turns away and rejects God's gift.

ⁱ These Christians identify with John Calvin and are referred to by scholars as Calvinists.

ⁱⁱ These Christians identify with Jacob Arminius and are referred to by scholars as Arminians.

ⁱⁱⁱ I. Howard Marshall, "The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology," in *Jesus the Saviour* (London: SPCK, 1990): 306-324. See also I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By The Power of God*; Robert Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, and Free Will*; Leroy Forliness, *The Quest for Truth*

^{iv} See the work listed above for even more detail which backs up these points.

^v William Lane *Hebrews* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1991), Volumes 47a, p.145.

^{vi} William Lane *Hebrews* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1991), Volumes 47b, p.296.

^{vii} A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Vol 14, p. 525.

^{viii} For a thorough discussion of the Biblical nature of faith, in addition to the work by John MacArthur, Jr., in *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988) and *The Gospel According To The Apostles* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), see Joseph Fitzmyer, *Paul and His Theology: A Brief Sketch* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1987), p. 85ff and especially Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 165ff.

^{ix} John MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p. 178.

^x William Booth, "The Founder's Messages to Soldiers," *Christianity Today*, October 5, 1992, p. 48.

^{xi} The following points are adapted from Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002).

^{xii} It is helpful to know the exact Greek phraseology in this passage because the old King James translation confused some people and made them wonder if the warning is over continuous sin or just one sin. Paul Ellingworth and Eugene Nida's scholarly work, *A Translators Handbook On the Letter To the Hebrews* (New York: United Bible Societies), helps. They write: The key word of this passage is purposely, which is the first word in the Greek sentence The "sinning" is not only deliberate but repeated and continued, as go on sinning shows; similarly New English Bible "if we persist in sin." If we purposely go on sinning may be rendered as "if we decide we want to go on sinning," or "if we make our plans so that we can go on sinning," or . . . "continue in sin."

See also Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle To The Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), pp. 530-532.

^{xiii} See Robert Stein, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The New American Commentary, Volume 24 (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman Press, 1992), p. 246-248; see also, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 329.

^{xiv} There is a great deal of scholarly discussion in recent times on just what these false teachers were advocating. Thomas Schriener has offered (what I believe to be) the most sensible perspective on this complicated issue. See, "'Works of Law' in Paul," *Novum Testamentum* 33,3 (1991): 217 - 144. See also F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, New International Greek Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982).

^{xv} Shank, *Life in the Son*, p. 264.

^{xvi} Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1997), pp 36-37.

^{xvii} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1937), p. 47.

^{xviii} Barna Research Group, "Is America's Faith Really Shifting?" [on-line], Retrieved 19 July 2003, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease;> Internet. See also Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1997), p. 38.

^{xix} Chuck Jones, "Walking in the Light, *Image* (Sept., 1987): 24.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 25.