

God's Plan of Salvation for His Lost Children

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

It is truly a tragedy that so many Christian people labor under the illusion that it is impossible for them ever to be lost.

Unfortunately, though, the Calvinistic dogma of “once—saved, always—saved,” has infected the brotherhood of Christ—at least practically, if not intellectually. It is a grim reality that there may be more lost people in our Sunday morning assemblies, who are identified as “members,” than there are those visiting with us—who have never obeyed the first principles of the gospel.

New Testament Evidence for Apostasy

Though denominationalists dispute the matter, the New Testament is emphatic in asserting that a Christian can depart from the faith and become lost. Simon was a sorcerer who lived in Samaria. He heard the gospel and submitted to its conditions. His conversion is described in precisely the same language as those of his fellows in the city (cf. Acts 8:12—13).

Subsequently, however, Simon became intrigued with the apostles' ability to convey spiritual gifts by means of the imposition of their hands. He attempted to bribe them so that he too could accomplish this feat. In a stinging rebuke, Peter informed him that, with such a disposition, he would “perish” (Acts 8:20). A. T. Robertson, a Baptist writer, says: “The natural meaning of Peter's language is that Simon was on the road to destruction” (1930, 107).

Without piling up the evidence, we merely introduce the following:

“My brethren, if any among you err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know that he who converts a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins” (Jas. 5:19—20).

Note that: “brethren” are in view; a brother can “err”; the erring one needs to be “converted”; such conversion results in “saving” the apostate's soul; the destiny of the wayward soul is “death.”

This is not physical death—which all experience—but spiritual death, i.e., eternal separation from God in hell (Rev. 20:14; cf. 2:11).

The Route Back to God

There are degrees of apostasy from the Lord. Some are stone—cold dead; there is no sign of spiritual life in them. Others are “lukewarm” (cf. Rev. 3:15—16), maintaining some semblance of identification with the church. In either case, these precious souls are lost. The question to be considered, therefore, is this: Once a Christian has wandered from the path of safety, what must he do to return?

Just as there are definite steps which one must take in order to become a child of God initially, e.g., believing, repenting of sin, confessing one's faith, and being immersed in water (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38, etc.), just so, there are requirements to being restored to Heaven's favor. Let us reflect upon the following.

Belief

Apostasy from the Christian Way is fundamentally a matter of the loss of faith. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus spoke of those who “for a while believe,” and then in a time of temptation, “fall away” (Lk. 8:13). The writer of Hebrews admonished: “Take heed, brothers, lest perhaps there should be in any one of you a wicked heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). Note the connection between “unbelief” and “falling away.”

A careful study of the term “belief,” as that word and its equivalents are employed in the book of Acts, reveals that true faith involves a submission to the Lord's will (cf. Acts 16:33—34). Correspondingly, when one ceases to be obedient, there is a sense in which he has stopped believing.

The first step of the prodigal, therefore is a rekindling of his faith. And since it is the case that the ultimate source of faith is the word of God (Rom. 10:17), the Scriptures must be brought to bear again upon the wayward heart. It may be more difficult to ignite faith the second time around, but there is no substitute.

The fallen saint must have the historical facts of the gospel instilled once more in his heart, he must trust the Savior, and commit himself to a program of fidelity. "Faith," without the obedience that is supposed to accompany such, is futile (cf. Jas. 2:14—26).

Repentance

Once faith has been planted in the erring brother's soul again, it should move him to repentance. In the case cited earlier, Simon was told to "repent" as a prelude to forgiveness (Acts 8:22). But what is repentance?

The term "repentance" is used in at least two senses in the New Testament. Occasionally it signifies simply deep emotion, the contrition one has when he realizes he has sinned against his Creator. John the Baptizer spoke of this emotion, and cautioned that "fruit" must accompany it (Mt. 3:8).

"Repentance" also may signify the transformation of life that results from sorrow. The Jews who were assembled on Pentecost already had hearts that were "pricked," yet they still were commanded to "repent" (Acts 2:37—38). Paul argued that "godly sorrow" produces "repentance" (2 Cor. 7:10). Clearly, "repentance" is something in addition to emotion; it entails a change of conduct.

Any experienced Christian leader can cite numerous instances where wayward church members allegedly "repented," when no modification of conduct was discernible at all. Mere words do not constitute a return to God.

Confession

The word "confess" derives from a compound Greek term, *homologeō*. The roots are: *homo*, "same," and *legō*, "to speak." The term carries the idea of agreement, assent.

In the context of our discussion, it means this. When a Christian is convicted by the Scriptures of transgression, he must humbly agree with the divine assessment, and be willing to say so!

The apostle John wrote: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). If one refuses to concede his sin, what then?

There are three possible venues of confession: to God alone; to God and to other persons—who may have been victims of the sin, or privy to it; a general public acknowledgment when the sin is widely known.

Let us think about each of these for a moment.

First, when one has sinned a sin that is against God alone, or perhaps known only to the Omniscient One, the matter can be settled between the principals involved. For example, if one, in anger, mentally lashes out at the Lord (as Job did on occasion), he need merely, in his petition to the Father, ask for forgiveness.

It is not necessary to "blab" mental sins to the entire world, as a former President did, for instance, when he told the whole of society of his spiritual lapses of lust for some women.

As a minister I've had folks respond to the invitation, only to confess the most private infractions. Frequently I've had to ask: "Do others know of this?" When the reply is in the negative, I tell them that there is no need to "advertise" this circumstance. A general statement is then made to the congregation and prayer is offered for the agonizing soul.

Second, when our sin is known to others, we are obligated to confess the fault—at least to those who are privy to the situation. Altercations that are private should be settled between "him and thee alone" (Mt. 18:15).

Occasionally, though, it is the case that a brother sins against another, but the transgressor does not have the courage to approach the offended party directly, acknowledging wrong and asking pardon. Rather, he will walk down the church aisle and make a generic confession: "I have done and said things against others that I shouldn't have; I ask for your prayers." That is not the way to remedy a personal sin against another.

Third, there is the matter of public confession. Sometimes one's sin is so widely identified that nothing but a public confession will suffice to satisfy the matter.

Near the conclusion of his third missionary campaign, Paul came to the city of Ephesus. As a result of his teaching, a church was established. These saints were zealous initially, with a genuine love for the Lord (cf. Rev. 2:4). Some of them, though, became entangled again in their old habits—apparently reverting to “magical” practices (for which Ephesus was known).

According to Luke's record, they were convicted of their error, and they came “confessing and declaring their deeds” (Acts 19:18). The sense of the passage seems to be this: These erring brethren openly acknowledged what had been widely known, i.e., their sinfulness in practicing magical crafts. Additionally, they brought their little scrolls, containing ritual inscriptions, and burned them “in the sight of all” (Acts 19:19). Lenski says that the implication of this language is that Paul was directing the procedure (1961, 799).

Some see the term “deeds” as a reference to the secret incantations of their sorcery practices (Bruce 1988, 359). McGarvey also takes the position that these brethren were merely exposing the magical formulas of their pre—Christian activities (n.d., 157).

We must respectfully disagree. This view does not appear to comport with the term “confessing,” which stands separate from the “declaring.” A Christian does not need to “confess” what he knows was forgiven at the time of his immersion (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Better is the view that these were new converts who continued to condone and/or practice these “deeds” after their primary obedience to the gospel (see: Alford n.d., 783).

That brings us to this question. How is it that some brethren fantasize that they can abandon the Lord's service—for weeks on end—and then, ultimately smitten by conscience, silently slip back into a regular church routine, without so much as a word of confession that they have neglected the Christian responsibilities?

Those who have strayed from faithful duty must concede that wrong, and somehow make their renewed disposition know to the church.

They might respond to the public invitation at the conclusion of a service. They may ask the elders to announce their penitence to the congregation. Or they could request that a statement be published in the bulletin, etc. The manner of their acknowledgement is a matter of expediency; the necessity of it is a point of law.

“Time” per se does not transform apostasy into fidelity. One cannot hope that God will simply “forget” a breach of fidelity, and so ignore the lack of prescribed procedure involved in restoration.

We cannot trifle with the Lord—who can both “forget” our sins, and yet “remember” our failure to obey (see Jer. 14:10).

There is a passage in one of John's epistles that is germane to this discussion. The apostle writes.

“If any man see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and God will give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request” (1 Jn. 5:16).

This text, among other things, suggests there are those for whom we may, and should petition God's forgiveness. By way of contrast, there are those for whom such efforts are futile. In the first instance, the brother is not persistently sinning (present tense) toward (pros) death (spiritual destruction).

On the other hand, there is sin toward death, i.e. unrestrained rebellion. The distinguishing difference obviously is this: In the former case the brother confesses his sin and turns therefrom (1 Jn. 1:9). In the other instance, the apostate pursues in his rebellion.

A case in point is found in the Corinthian correspondence. It is rather apparent that the brother in Corinth, who had so scandalized the church by his flagrant fornication (1 Cor. 5), had, at a later time, repented and openly acknowledged his wrong. And so the brethren were encouraged to forgive and comfort him (cf. 2 Cor. 2:6—7).

How can one pray for a brother's actual forgiveness, if he has no knowledge that the offender has conformed to God's law of pardon? Under normal circumstances, confession authenticates the sincerity of the penitent's heart.

In summary: When one's sins are strictly personal and private, he is not required to broadcast them. On the other hand, when a person's transgressions involve other people and are widely known, they must be resolved in a more public format. Silent meditation will not suffice.

Prayer

Finally, the penitent is instructed to pray for forgiveness, which, ultimately, only God can grant. We ought, therefore, to pray for ourselves (Acts 8:22), and then request others to petition the Lord on our behalf (Jas. 5:16). We have been assured that when we sin, Christ, as our Advocate, will mediate for us, and that his blood will cleanse our wickedness (1 Jn. 1:7).

Conclusion

Here is a sobering reality. Just as there are many who believe they have conformed to the divine plan of salvation in becoming a Christian—but actually have not; even so, there are members of the church who, perhaps unknowingly, have neglected God's plan of salvation for his lost children. Each Christian should examine his life—and make sure he is right with God.

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Scripture References

Acts 8:12; Acts 8:20; James 5:19; Revelation 20:14; Revelation 3:15; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Luke 8:13; Hebrews 3:12; Acts 16:33; Romans 10:17; James 2:14; Acts 8:22; Matthew 3:8; Acts 2:37; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 John 1:9; Matthew 18:15; Revelation 2:4; Acts 19:18; Acts 19:19; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Jeremiah 14:10; 1 John 5:16; 1 Corinthians 5; James 5:16; 1 John 1:7

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