

Spiritual backsliding

It is important that one understands the phenomenon of apostatising, or backsliding, as every believer should be able to identify and counter this backward course in his or her spiritual life whenever it occurs. If you wish to determine the objective truth about spiritual backsliding you should consult the Bible and not biased or erroneous church dogma. Some churches, mostly in the Wesleyan tradition, agree to the possibility of backsliding while others, mostly Calvinistic and Lutheran churches, reject the possibility of apostatising and falling from grace. What does the Bible teach?

Stagnation and decline. A Christian's spiritual life is not a static and unchangeable condition. You either make progress or you stagnate and start declining. The biblical injunction is that you must grow up spiritually to the mature man or woman in Christ (Ephesians 4:13-14; Hebrews 5:12 - 6:1). Peter says: "You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away by the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:17-18).

It is conspicuous that people who backslide become bitter and critical, even judgemental, of others. In their conversations they instil these negative thoughts in other people and weaken them spiritually. Some of the backsliders even become bitter towards God because He allegedly allowed certain things to happen to them. But they fail to blame their own carnality for their afflictions, or Satan who tempted them. They see themselves as innocent martyrs and also promote feelings of unbelief and doubt among the Christians who exhorted them. The basic cause of apostatising is sin. Many Christians do not resist sin. Because of their attitude of compromise, they expose themselves to sin and are consequently drawn away from the Lord. "Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits." (1 Corinthians 15:33). Jesus said, "Sin will be rampant everywhere and will cool the love of many." (Matthew 24:12).

Restoration or further backsliding. The call to backsliders is that they should forsake the dangerous way of sin and return to the Lord. If they don't do it they may lapse into a state of rebellion, which will induce the Lord to take His Holy Spirit from them, thereby terminating His relationship with them. The Lord Jesus said to the congregation in Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent." (Revelation 2:4-5). The lampstand is the container in which is oil is poured to keep the lamp burning. That symbolises the work of the Holy Spirit. When the lampstand is removed, total darkness sets in.

The same result of wilful sin occurred in the Old Testament: "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die." (Ezekiel 18:24). That is the tragic end of perpetual backsliding. The Lord said of Israel: "Will they fall and not rise? Will one turn away and not return? Why then has this people slidden back, Jerusalem in a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return." (Jeremiah 8:4-5). They were often called to repentance from this fallen state: "Return, backsliding Israel, says the Lord, and I will not cause My anger to fall on you; for I am merciful." (Jeremiah 3:12). "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them

freely... they shall be revived." (Hosiah 14:4,7).

Sin and worldliness. People who are guilty of continuous sin and worldliness will inevitably backslide further. If you are on this way, you will undermine and eventually destroy your spiritual life. Initially, you only 'cool down' and become a backslidden Christian, but eventually you may depart from the faith and fall from grace if you don't repent in time.

Paul seriously warned against this possibility: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:12-13). It is obvious that these "brethren" must watch and guard against yielding to sin. If they continuously indulge in sin they will depart from the living God and get an evil and unbelieving heart. Should they die in that state they will certainly open their eyes in Hell. They have to repent anew if they wish to restore their broken relationship with God.

An example of extreme backsliding is found in the parable of the lost son. He wilfully broke his relationship with his father because of his desire to live a sinful life in the world. There he lived a prodigal life and spent his money on prostitutes (Luke 15:13,30). Fortunately, this young man came to his senses while living as a sinner. He longed to return to his father and to restore his broken relationship with him. He was prepared to subject himself unconditionally to his father's authority, to the point of even becoming a humble and unworthy servant in his father's house. The lost son knew that he has gravely sinned, and that his sin has separated him from his father. He resolved to break with his sinful life by completely forsaking it: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." (Luke 15:18). His father heartily forgave him and fully restored him. From this parable we learn that there is definitely grace to backsliders - even if they have again become slaves of sin, strayed very far from God and fell from grace. However, do not make the mistake of justifying the prodigal son in his backslidden state by assuming that he can never become lost because he will always, under all circumstances, be the son of his father. The father himself said to the older son: "Your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." (Luke 15:32). In his backslidden state the son was not physically dead, but spiritually. He was described as "lost" and "dead, but was revived from his spiritual deadness.

The Greek word for *revive* (*anazao*) literally means *to live again*. The Strong's concordance and dictionary renders its meaning "to recover life; live again; revive." This word can only apply to a person who was alive, then died, and was afterwards restored to life. The son was alive while in his father's house, then died spiritually after indulging in a life of sin and thus became lost, but was again made spiritually alive when he returned to his father. Some people never return from their lost state and perish. That happened to king Saul. The Bible says: "But the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul." (1 Samuel 16:14; cf. 1 Samuel 18:12). Shortly before his death Saul consulted a medium to bring up the spirit of Samuel. Saul said to Samuel: "I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me any longer." Then Samuel said: "Why then do you ask me, seeing the Lord has departed from you and has become your enemy?" (1 Samuel 28:15-16). In the New Testament, we read about Demas who was a backslider. It is nowhere stated that he returned to the Lord. Paul said: "For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world." (2 Timothy 4:10). His problem was the same as that of the lost son, who was tempted and lured away by the evil pleasures of the world.

Our spiritual allegiance and moral lives can change, depending on the spiritual kingdom of which we are followers. The unsaved priests and scribes in Israel had Satan as father (John 8:44). However, many of them were born again later and thus became children of God (Acts 6:7). But such people still have their free will; they can yield to temptations and doctrines of demons and consequently backslide to the point where they depart from the faith and become spiritually lost and dead (1 Timothy 4:1; Galatians 5:4). It is important to note that only believers can depart from the faith. They will then have lost their eternal security as that is only in Christ, and we only have it as long as we abide in Him. Our tie with Christ need not be broken, but it *can* be broken by us.

Prayer of rededication. It is a joyous occasion when a backslider immediately responds to admonitions to return to the Lord and confess his / her sins. King David seriously apostatised when he committed murder and adultery. But he immediately humbled himself before the Lord when he was reproached because of his sins. He prayed: "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight... Purge me... and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... Blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You." (Psalm 51:4,7,9-13). David realised that there was a definite possibility of God taking His Holy Spirit away from him, but because of his repentance it did not happen. God also gave David the assurance that He would not depart from his son, Solomon, as He has departed from Saul: "My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you." (2 Samuel 7:15). Solomon was a backslider who worshipped idols after serving the Lord for many years. (1 Kings 11:4-10).

Doctrinal decline. The Bible clearly warns against doctrinal decline. People who depart from the truth are playing into Satan's hands, as they believe in lies and false interpretations of Scriptural truths: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons." (1 Timothy 4:1). Such people abandon the true faith and embrace false teachings. That amounts to rejecting the true doctrine of salvation based upon the atoning death of the Lord Jesus. In modern times, there are many theologians who no longer believe in the virgin birth, messiahship, and the deity of the Lord Jesus. Preachers who are proclaiming these and other heresies, are spiritually lost and also draw many people with them on the way of deception.

Peter refers to preachers who were formerly saved (bought by the Lord) but later denied Christ for who He really is. Backslidden preachers also attack and discredit evangelical believers who still hold to the truth: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed." (2 Peter 2:1-2). Some of the most serious warnings in the Bible are addressed to false preachers who once preached the truth but then turned their backs on these truths: "They have forsaken the right way and gone astray... For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them." (2 Peter 2:15,20-21). Paul warned an entire congregation that was on the

verge of denying the atoning death of Jesus by regarding it as insufficient for salvation. They decided to also observe the law and circumcision: "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Galatians 5:4).

The changing of God's Word. The Word of the Lord is eternal (Luke 21:33), unchangeable (Deuteronomy 4:2) and absolutely true (John 17:17). A person who is so presumptuous as to change God's Word that was written by holy men (2 Peter 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:16), injures the honour of God who is the source of all truth. Even if such a person had a Christian testimony earlier, his name will be blotted out from the Book Of Life: "If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book Of Life." (Revelation 22:18-19; cf. Deuteronomy 4:2). However, if we remain true to the Lord and His Word, He will never take away our names from the Book Of Life. (Revelation 3:5). Unfortunately, not all Christians are overcomers. Some of them commit treason against the Lord and His infallible Word, thereby bowing the knee to Baal.

Spiritual high treason. Although most backsliders, including those who fell from grace, can again return to the Lord and be spiritually restored, there are also those who can never be restored to life. They are the ones who committed spiritual high treason against the King and Saviour by denying Him and thereby despising and rejecting His saving grace. They have not only, like the lost son, been overcome by sin, temptations and worldliness, but have explicitly defamed and rejected the Lord. It should be noted that only Christians can commit spiritual high treason. You must first be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven before you can revolt against the King whom you served, and reject His ownership on your life. The Bible says: "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the Heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame." (Hebrews 6:4-6).

These people consciously reject Christ and publicly put Him to shame. In so doing they crucify Him again and thereby close the door to restoration because they have rejected the only One who can save them: "For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgement, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:26-29).

The person guilty of this offence has been sanctified by the blood of Christ, which is clearly stated, but in spite of this fact he tramples the Son of God underfoot, counts His blood a common thing and insults the Holy Spirit. This amounts to an outright rejection of the Mediator of the New Testament. Israelites who committed high treason against Moses, the mediator of the Old Testament, were summarily executed. How much worse punishment will he receive who wilfully commits high treason against Jesus Christ? Paul repeated this serious warning to the Hebrew believers: "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone should fall short of the grace of God; lest any roof of bitterness springing up should cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright." (Hebrews 12:14-16).

Professors Walvoord & Zuck (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 810-811) say: "Peace with all men as well as personal holiness must be vigorously sought since without holiness no one will see the Lord. Since no sin can stand in God's presence, Christians must, and will be, sinless when they see the Lord (cf. 1 John 3:2). That realisation offers motivation for pursuing holiness here and now. But the author may also have had in mind the thought that one's perception of God even now is conditioned by his real measure of holiness (Matthew 5:8). As a grim reminder of what can happen among believers, the writer warned that one who misses the grace of God may become like a bitter root whose infidelity to God affects others. Here the author had in mind Deuteronomy 29:18 where an Old Covenant apostate was called a root that produces bitter poison: "so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness." Such a person would be Godless (profane, unhallowed, desecrated) like Esau, Jacob's brother, whose loose and profane character led him to sell his inheritance rights as the oldest son for the temporary gratification of a single meal. He warned the readers not to yield to transitory pressures and forfeit their inheritances. If some did, they would ultimately regret the foolish step and might find their inheritance privileges irrevocably lost as were Esau's. This would of course be true of one who ended his Christian experience in a state of apostasy, which the writer had continually warned against. Slander against the Holy Spirit is also an unpardonable sin as such a person resists, slanders, and drives off the only Spirit who can convict him of sin: "Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men." (Matthew 12:31). People who have insulted the Holy Spirit by acting blasphemously towards Him, will never again be convicted of their sin and can therefore not repent and be saved.

Eternal security. What about the Calvinistic doctrine of eternal security in the light of what has been said above? This doctrine leans strongly on the following statement of the Lord Jesus: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." (John 10:27-28). However, the assurance given in this Scripture is that no external power will snatch us from the hand of the Lord. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to endure, so we can bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13). Satan cannot snatch us from the hand of the Lord unless we yield to his temptations by wilful sinning. The possibility is always there that we can, of our own accord, become unfaithful and stray from the Lord.

The condition of the promise in John 10:27-28 is that we must keep on listening to the Lord and following Him. If we fail to do that we can certainly expect problems. Jesus said: "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me... If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned." (John 15:4,6). If we abide in Him, as He in us, then we will never perish. But what happens if we become unfaithful to Christ and depart from the truth of His Word? Then we *can* apostatise (become spiritually withered), fall from grace (cast out as a branch) and perish (be thrown into the fire). We still have a free will, and because of that we can take wrong decisions and sin. We will always have to bear the consequences of what we do.

Many of the holy angels in Heaven sinned and were cast out of heaven (2 Peter 2:4). Because they consciously and stubbornly committed treason against God, they and their leader, Lucifer, can never be restored to the favour of God. They are forever fallen angels. Likewise, human beings also have the ability to turn against God. They can grieve the Holy Spirit and even resist

and quench Him (Acts 7:51; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). The incorruptible seed through which they are saved, can be choked by the thorns of sin in their lives (Matthew 13:7,22). When that happens, they will not have been snatched from God's hand by someone else, but decided themselves to leave the narrow way and to make room for Satan in their lives, thereby rejoining the broad way of compromise, sin and worldliness.

Every Christian has the obligation to persevere on the way of the Lord to the end, and never to deviate from it: "For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end." (Hebrews 3:14; cf. Hebrews 3:6). That clearly means that we must not abandon our faith in Christ, as some believers do. Paul exhorted Timothy to keep a fast hold of faith throughout his life in order to have "faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck." (1 Timothy 1:19). It is not necessary to be spiritually deceived and become shipwrecked, but then we must abide in Christ and observe His Word. If we deviate from the way of truth, spiritual stumbling and ultimate shipwreck awaits us. Jesus Christ is able to keep us from stumbling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory if we trust Him to do it. (Jude v.24).

A person cannot live as he / she likes, lapse into the sin and unbelief of Hebrews 3:12-13, and deceive himself / herself that he / she is still on his / her way to Heaven! We must hold fast to the Lord and His Word. The perseverance of the saints demands that they diligently follow Christ. They must become strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, and put on the whole armour of God that they may be able to stand against the wiles of Satan. (Ephesians 6:10-11). Failing to do this, Christians might lose their vigilance and be caught unawares by Satan. When brethren fall into false teaching they must be edified, "in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:25-26). Eternal security and continued deliverance from satanic deception is only enjoyed by those who abide in Christ and in the truth of His Word.

The viewpoint of Arthur Pink. The Calvinist, Arthur Pink, made the following sober remarks on the promise in John 10:27-28, which is taken by many of his fellow Calvinists as an assurance of unconditional eternal security: "There is a deadly and damnable heresy being widely propagated today to the effect that, if a sinner accepts Christ as his / her personal Saviour, no matter how he / she lives afterwards, he / she cannot perish. That is a satanic lie, for it is at direct variance with the teaching of the Word. More than believing in Christ is necessary to ensure the soul's reaching Heaven. "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed." (John 8:31). The Amplified Bible says: "If you abide in My Word - hold fast to My teachings and live in accordance with them - you are truly My disciples."

"My sheep", said Christ, "hear [heed, obey] My voice... and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they [those who plainly evidence themselves to be of His sheep by yielding to His authority and following the example which He has left them - and none others] shall never perish." (John 10:27-28). It is not honest to generalise the promise of verse 28, as it must be restricted to the characters described in verse 27. These conditions are confirmed by other Scriptures. Paul says that through His death, Christ will present us holy, blameless and irreproachable in His sight, "if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel." (Colossians 1:22-23). "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised it is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23). There is a very real need to pray for persevering grace, both for ourselves and for our brethren."

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Arthur Pink was severely criticised by other Calvinists for defining perseverance of the saints in such a way that it places a responsibility on believers to diligently keep on following the Lord to the end. According to them, a Christian will go to Heaven even if he backslides and falls into sin. According to their unbiblical teaching, imputed righteousness relieves you from all human efforts to live a holy and worthy life. However, Paul said that although he, as a Christian, competed in the spiritual race, that did not guarantee him a victorious finish. He held out the possibility that even he could be disqualified: "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Backsliding through deception. The eternal security that the Lord Jesus offers us is conditional. We need to submit, repent, confess our sins and accept the Lord Jesus as our Saviour to become born again children of God. After our salvation we must live holy, dedicated lives by always remaining faithful to Christ. If we don't persevere on the way of holiness and true discipleship, there is a very real danger of being deceived by Satan and ending up as backsliders. Consider the following examples:

Corinth: Paul was deeply disappointed by the carnal members of the congregation in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:1-3), who had no discernment and easily fell prey to Satan's deception: "For I am jealous for you with Godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I might present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you put up with it well." (2 Corinthians 11:2-4). False teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ were presented under the influence of deceiving spirits, and most of the church members naively accepted it.

Ephesus: The Ephesians received stern warnings from Paul, but evidently did not heed them: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." (Acts 20:29-30). A generation later, the entire congregation was backslidden, and were called to repentance by Christ (Revelation 2:4-5).

Galatia: The Galatians have backslidden into a legalistic form of religion in which Christ's work of atonement was not regarded as sufficient for salvation. Paul strongly reprimanded them for going backwards: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:1-3). They ended up as backslidden, carnal believers who were at risk of falling from grace. (Galatians 5:4).

Hebrew believers: Many of the Hebrew Christians lost their faith because of unbelief and sin (Hebrews 3:12-13). Others were nominal believers without a true faith, as they did not really put their trust in the gospel message (Hebrews 4:1-2). The Messiah reproved them for being hypocrites without changed hearts and a living relationship with God, as they only observed the traditions of men. (Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:8-9). Even those who were truly saved, stagnated and became spiritually backslidden; consequently, they suffered from a lack of spiritual growth

(Hebrews 5:12-13). Because of this, they remained unsure of their salvation, and repented time and again without growing up to spiritual maturity. (Hebrews 6:1).

Pergamos: The compromise that the church in Pergamos made with the secular world inevitably gave rise to disloyalty and infidelity among members. The Lord referred to their compromise as "the doctrine of Balaam who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality." (Revelation 2:14). Many of the modern churches have also been lured into various practices of fornication with the non-Christian religions, as well as moral impurity.

Thyatira: The church in Thyatira was characterised by false teachings and sexual immorality. Many of the modern churches are equally guilty of these sins as false teachings are proliferating, while sexual immorality (including lesbianism and homosexuality) is openly tolerated and even accepted. Churches who share these characteristics have backslidden so far that they have fallen from grace. They will miss the Rapture and end up in the Tribulation period as worshippers of the Antichrist. (Revelation 2:20-22).

Sardis: The church in Sardis only had a form of Godliness from which they had to repent. Jesus said: "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." (Revelation 3:1). They knew nothing of being regenerated and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Laodicea: The smug and lukewarm church of Laodicea is also typical of many of the End Time churches. Satisfied with their outward form of Godliness, they continue on a course of formal worship while being unaware of their spiritual poverty. In spite of their prosperity and well-organised activities, Christ is not worshipped with a sincere heart. The Lord dissociates Himself from such a Man-made religion that aims only at wealth and outward appearance (Revelation 3:16-17; cf. 1 Timothy 6:7-12). They confess the Name of the Lord with their lips, but in their hearts they are full of themselves and glory in their own excellence.

The wealth that features so prominently in Laodicean churches amounts to more than mere material possessions. It also refers to the intellectual achievements of modern Man, and his aptitude for psychological solutions to his problems. Enchanted with his self-righteousness, he is reluctant to acknowledge his dependence upon God, and also shuns the gospel of the Cross and the shed blood of Christ to atone for our sins. *Laodicea* means *human rights* and clearly reflects the humanistic nature of this church. As an institution, the church is controlled by Man and is utilised as an instrument for the creation of a more humanistic (Man-centred) society. The result is that the whole institution reflects a mere form of religion. Man becomes his own God, and he preaches a Man-made prosperity gospel based on the accumulation of secular wealth and humanistic achievements.

Laodicea portrays the image of rational Man without faith. He argues everything with his mind. Consequently, his religion is limited to an intellectual knowledge of the Bible. The real experience of faith, involving the acceptance of God's promise of a rebirth, is foreign to him. With his allegorical and relativistic interpretation of the Bible, he can bypass these basic spiritual demands and teach his followers to do the same. This approach leads to the establishment of a nominal Christianity and churches that evaluate themselves solely according to human standards. In terms of their academic parameters they regard themselves as exceptionally good. Self-deception of this nature has very serious consequences as people with self-imposed righteousness without a spiritual rebirth do not belong to the Lord.

Warnings to nominal and backslidden churches. The Lord Jesus issued the following warnings to nominal and backslidden churches: The lampstand of churches that only have a form of Godliness will be removed by Him, which means that He will take His Holy Spirit from them (Revelation 2:5). Churches that compromised with the world will be judged by the Word of God because they were untrue to the living Word, Jesus Christ (Revelation 2:16). Backslidden churches that accepted doctrines of demons will end up in the Tribulation period unless they repent of their deeds. (Revelation 2:22).

The Lord Jesus says that He withdraws Himself completely from churches that are characterised by spiritual lukewarmness because of materialism and self-justification. (Revelation 3:16-17). True Christians must fulfil the Great Commission on Earth while enduring relentless attacks from a world that lies under the sway of Satan, and also from false churches that only have a form of Godliness. This is a superhuman assignment that cannot be executed without the gracious and enabling power of the Holy Spirit, and also not without a clear disposition of perseverance on the narrow way of the Lord until He comes again. In spite of their little strength in this dispensation (Revelation 3:8), true disciples of Jesus Christ will be fed with Heavenly manna and be strengthened for the struggle.

We should never give up because of fierce opposition by withdrawing from "the good fight of faith". (1 Timothy 6:12). Observe the example of Jesus: "For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." (Hebrews 12:3-4). "For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul." (Hebrews 10:36-39). Are you an overcomer who perseveres on the way of the Lord? Jesus Christ said: "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown." (Revelation 3:11). In the light of His sudden coming, we are exhorted to hold fast what we have, lest our crown be robbed from us by the enemy. Everyone who overcomes will be a pillar in the temple of God (Revelation 3:12), which is symbolic of the permanent place in Heaven of true believers who overcame.

Before being exiled to Patmos, John warned the believers against backsliding and losing their reward in Heaven: "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward." (2 John:8). We effectively have to resist false doctrines and moral corruption if we wish to remain true to the doctrine of Christ. "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son." (2 John:9). Professors Walvoord & Zuck (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*) say the following on this Scripture: "These words suggest strongly that the apostle was thinking here of defection from the truth by those who had once held to it. The word 'continue' (Greek *meno*) has been used 23 times in 1 John in reference to the 'abiding' life. A person who does not continue in a thing has evidently once been in it. The New Testament writers were realists about the possibility of true Christians falling prey to heresy and warned about it, particularly in the book Hebrews. John had just cautioned his readers about possible loss of reward (v. 8). They were thus now cautioned not to overstep the boundaries of sound doctrine, but to remain where they were, and to abide (continue) in the teaching about Christ. To deviate from the truth is to leave God behind. God is not with a person who does so. What such a person does, he does without God."

Marginal Christians. How should one guard against the possibility of apostatising? Carnality is the breeding-ground for backsliding. If your life is not controlled by the Holy Spirit, you are inevitably under the control of the flesh (your old human nature) and will be a marginal Christian. Spiritual stagnation sets in because the uncrucified flesh blocks any form of growth: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." (Galatians 5:17). The Galatians were a congregation that made a good start, but they subsequently became backslidden to a state of carnality in which they trusted the flesh (Galatians 3:1-3). The Corinthians lapsed into a similar state (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). The solution to this problem is very clear: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16).

Why is it so dangerous to live under the domination of the flesh as a backslider? "If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (Romans 8:13). The Amplified Bible says: "If you live according to the dictates of the flesh you will surely die. But if through the power of the Holy Spirit you are habitually putting to death the evil deeds prompted by the body, you shall really and genuinely live forever." There is only one life worthy of living, and that is the Spirit-led life of increasing holiness. That life demands the putting off of the old nature which is intent on pulling us down to the level of our sinful past: "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord... that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old Man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new Man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness." (Ephesians 4:17,22-24; cf. Romans 12:1-2). Christians who do not deny themselves (their old nature) and take up their cross by which the world has been crucified to them, and they to the world, cannot be true disciples of the Lord Jesus (Luke 14:27; Galatians 6:14). Such believers are, because of their own lack of commitment, candidates for backsliding.

Deal with those things which are causing problems in your life: put them off while more completely putting on the new life in Christ Jesus (Colossians 3:1-17). Serve the Lord with your whole heart, and never look back or turn back after you put your hand to the plough. (Luke 9:62). Be always on the alert for spiritual deception. This was the first warning of the Lord Jesus in His Olivet discourse: "Take heed that no one deceives you." (Matthew 24:4). We are often warned that spiritual deception will be the cause of widespread backsliding among believers in the End Time. Many churches and individuals will be influenced, and even completely dominated, by a satanic spirit of deception, spearheaded by Satan as an "angel of light" who will pretend to be a messenger of God to empower Christian groups with new 'fads', a vision for world domination, and mighty signs and wonders. (Matthew 24:24; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4,13-15; 2 Thessalonians 2:3,9-10; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:3-4).
