

The Danger in
Undermining Our Faith—
and What You
Can Do about It

Saving Christianity



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INTRODUCTION

Does Christianity Need to Be Saved?

A friend—let’s call him Jack—recently told me a story that broke my heart. I’m sure it breaks the heart of Jesus, as well.

“My wife found Christ and was baptized in a non-denominational community church,” Jack told me. “She grew up there, and she and I were married in that church by the pastor who founded it. The pastor was a godly man who preached the gospel. He taught the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, as the inspired Word of God.

“I remember sitting in his office with my bride-to-be for our premarital counseling. The most important thing he wanted to know about me was this: Was Jesus my Lord and Savior? Was I a genuine, Bible-believing Christian? Would the Bible have absolute authority over my conduct as a husband and as a Christian?

“Years went by, and that godly minister passed away. The church board called a new minister.

“When the new pastor arrived, he said all the right things and professed to be an evangelical Christian. But over time,

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his message changed. He told the congregation he was ‘evolving’ in his faith. He stopped calling the Bible ‘the Word of God,’ and began calling it ‘the book about God’ or ‘the book that contains God’s message.’ If you asked him whether the Bible is inspired by God, he’d say, ‘Parts of the Bible are so relevant and life-changing that you’d have to call them “inspired by God.”’ If you asked him whether people needed a Savior, he’d tell you, ‘Some people need God, others don’t. God isn’t offended by those who don’t need him.’ He once called himself ‘an agnostic who loves Jesus.’

“Obviously, this man was not an evangelical Christian. He didn’t preach the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—the gospel on which the church was founded. As it became clear that this pastor had fallen away from orthodox, biblical faith, some board members tried to oppose him, but others supported him.

“Hundreds of people who had faithfully attended and supported the church began leaving in disillusionment. Over a few years, the church dwindled from a membership of around nine hundred to less than one hundred.

“With so few donors, the congregation could no longer afford to maintain the buildings of that once-thriving church. The pastor and the board sold the church site to a secular business. Today, the tiny congregation still exists under its original name, but without a permanent location. The people meet in various places, wherever they can find a meeting place. Sometimes they meet in a city park or in a senior living center. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with a church holding services out in the community, especially

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as a form of evangelistic outreach. But that's not what this church is doing. It was forced to sell off the physical legacy of its evangelical past because it no longer preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“The original name of that church still exists as words on a website. But the church where my wife and I were married is dead. I looked at the website recently, and it's filled with clichés and slogans: ‘We are a progressive Christian community.’ ‘Love wins.’ ‘There's more faith in searching than in certainty, in questions than in answers.’ ‘We're about having a conversation, not indoctrination.’

“This idea they call ‘progressive Christianity’ has already killed one church. Like a cancer, it's metastasizing and trying to kill all of orthodox, evangelical Christianity. The people in the church where my wife and I were married didn't see it coming. They were blindsided. People need to be warned. They need to know how dangerous these ideas are.”

The Threat from the Inside

We live in times of spiritual and moral confusion. So-called progressive Christianity is infiltrating and seducing the evangelical church—and it is killing the church while claiming it is “saving Christianity.” A few years ago, the cover of *Newsweek's* Easter issue blared in red letters, “The Decline and Fall of Christian America.” In 2015, the Daily Beast website asked, “Does Christianity Have a Future?” As our culture wobbles wildly on its spiritual axis, many are asking whether Christianity can survive in the twenty-first century.

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Some are asking whether we need to reinvent Christianity in order to save it.

My friend, I have written this book to declare to you that people need saving, our society needs saving, our nation needs saving, and our world needs saving—but *Christianity does not need to be saved*.

In the pages that follow, I will show you, candidly and clearly, with abundant evidence, that the only harm that can ever come to the gospel or to the church of Jesus Christ comes from those who are trying to “save” Christianity by reinventing it and distorting it beyond recognition.

From the first century to the twenty-first century, the greatest threat to Christianity has never come from the outside—from persecution, atheism, the godless culture, or opposing religions. In fact, *external* attacks have historically strengthened and purified the church.

The greatest threats to the church have always been *internal*. The greatest threats have come from those who claim to be Christians, who are leaders in the church, but whose teachings and doctrines are at odds with God’s Word. Satan is working overtime to destroy the church from within. It’s always an inside job. Many once-evangelical churches are now filled with the unsaved, the uncommitted, and the unconverted. As the church goes, so goes society.

Some false teachers started in the evangelical Christian community but left to form “progressive Christian” communities or “emerging” churches. But many others are still inside the evangelical church, or teaching at evangelical colleges, universities, and seminaries. They are poisoning the

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Bible-believing church from within. I want to alert you and arm you with vital information so that you can discern the essentials of the Christian faith as set forth in the Bible. I want you to recognize false teachers and false doctrines when you see them. I don't want you to be fooled.

In the great commission, Jesus commanded the church to evangelize and convert the world for him. Today, the world is converting the church on behalf of Satan, the god of this world. When churches and church leaders corrupt “the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people,”¹ they are cooperating in the destruction of the church, sowing seeds of spiritual death. God’s Word is the true light for all of humanity, especially for us as twenty-first-century Christians, living in these chaotic times.

These leaders who think they are saving Christianity by deconstructing God’s truth are in fact the greatest danger the church faces today. Though I don’t doubt their good intentions, I believe that Satan is using them as willing marks to destroy the church from within. And that’s why, when speaking of those who identify themselves as “progressive” or “emerging,” I deliberately place the word *Christians* in quotation marks. Please understand, I am not judging these people as unsaved. God alone knows the status of their souls. But to me, the word *Christian* has a specific definition that these progressive “Christians” don’t meet—by their own declaration. And I simply cannot in good conscience refer to people as Christians who treat God’s Word as an untrustworthy and unreliable narrative, and who deny the truth of John 3:16 and John 14:6.

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Accordingly, I have five goals in writing this book:

1. To expose the false teaching that is destroying the church from within.
2. To renew your confidence in the God of the Bible and in Jesus Christ, his only Son.
3. To renew your confidence in the future of the church and the central role it plays in human history.
4. To promote peace, unity, and understanding in the body of Christ by appealing to these false teachers to repent of their error.
5. To present the essential, biblical, nonnegotiable tenets of authentic Christianity, the doctrines I call “mere faith.” This is the original faith God entrusted to us in his Word—a faith that must never be exchanged for the lies of this fallen world.

The good news is that the historic gospel of Jesus Christ is still the Good News. The good news is that there are sound, biblical answers to the questions and doubts raised by post-modern, post-evangelical, progressive “Christians.” The good news is that we do not have to wander in a fog of uncertainty about God’s Word and God’s Son. The good news is that God is still in control of history, and Jesus is still the way, the truth, and the life.



PART ONE

**THE SLIDE
TOWARD
COMPROMISE**

A Short History of Spiritual Defection

Charles Templeton was a twenty-year-old sports cartoonist for the Toronto *Globe and Mail* when he decided to follow Jesus Christ. In 1941, when he was twenty-five, Templeton founded Toronto's Avenue Road Church of the Nazarene and served as the church's pastor—despite never having attended seminary. The church grew and thrived under his leadership.

Four years later, he met Chicago pastor Torrey Johnson at a gathering of Christian youth leaders in Winona Lake, Indiana, and the two formed an organization they called Youth for Christ International (YFC). The new evangelistic organization hired a fiery young preacher named Billy Graham as its first full-time evangelist.

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Templeton conducted many evangelistic meetings for YFC, and thousands of young people came to Christ through his preaching. But he began experiencing doubts about the Bible and doubts about his calling as an evangelist. After all, he had no formal training. Templeton decided to enroll at Princeton to study the Bible and theology in a more structured way.

At Princeton, Templeton encountered liberal theology for the first time. His instructors challenged his thinking and his faith. He came away believing that the Bible is a flawed document, written by fallible people. He no longer considered it the living Word of God. He concluded that science, not the Bible, held the answers to humanity's questions and problems.

Through correspondence and personal conversations, Charles Templeton began to challenge his friend Billy Graham. Templeton asked Graham tough theological questions. He tried to convince him that the Bible was untrustworthy. As a result, Graham's own doubts began to grow.

In 1949, Billy Graham received an invitation from Henrietta Mears to speak at the Forest Home conference center in Southern California. Mears was an influential Bible teacher who mentored Bill and Vonette Bright (founders of Campus Crusade), Jim Rayburn (founder of Young Life), and Louis Evans Jr. (pastor of Bel Air Church). But Graham was reluctant to accept the invitation. Fresh from an evangelism effort in Pennsylvania that he felt had gone poorly, and with his faith under assault from his friend Charles Templeton, Graham's confidence was at a low ebb. How

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could he preach the gospel from a Bible he no longer trusted with full certainty?

Despite his doubts, Billy Graham accepted the invitation to Forest Home, and while he was there he immersed himself in the Scriptures. As he read and meditated on the Bible, he encountered one phrase again and again: “Thus saith the Lord.” He realized that this one phrase, reverberating throughout Scripture, was working on his heart, calling him to a conviction that the Bible truly is God’s divinely inspired, eternal, powerful Word.

One night during his stay at Forest Home, while on a solitary stroll in the woods, Graham set his Bible on a stump and knelt before it as a makeshift prayer altar. “O God!” he called out. “There are many things in this book I do not understand.” He confessed in prayer that he had no answer for many of the questions his friend Charles Templeton had raised. But the Holy Spirit moved him to say, “Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by *faith!* I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.”¹

The next day, Billy Graham spoke at a conference meeting, and four hundred people responded by committing their lives to Christ. Henrietta Mears said that Graham “preached with authority” in a way she hadn’t seen in him before that night.²

Beginning in late September 1949, Billy Graham led the historic Los Angeles Crusade under a circus tent dubbed the Canvas Cathedral. The crusade, originally planned to last three weeks, was held over for an additional five weeks

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as the nightly crowds began to swell. Graham believed that everything God accomplished through his ministry could be traced to the night he set his Bible on a tree stump at Forest Home and accepted it as God's inspired Word.³

Years later, Charles Templeton said this of his lost friendship with Billy Graham: "I disagree with him at almost every point in his views on God and Christianity and think that much of what he says in the pulpit is puerile, archaic nonsense. But there is no feigning in Billy Graham: he believes what he believes with an invincible innocence. He is the only mass-evangelist I would trust. And I miss him."⁴

Though Templeton and Graham no longer had a shared faith in common, they remained on friendly terms. In 1996, five years before his death, Charles Templeton wrote his autobiography—which bore the tragic title of *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*—in which he recalled a conversation he had with Billy Graham after the two had parted ways theologically:

In the course of our conversation, I said, "But, Billy, it's simply not possible any longer to believe, for instance, the biblical account of creation. . . ."

"I don't accept that," Billy said. "And there are reputable scholars who don't."

"Who are these scholars?" I said. "Men in conservative Christian colleges?"

"Most of them, yes," he said. "But that's not the point. I believe the Genesis account of creation because it's in the Bible. I've discovered something

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in my ministry: when I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the Word of God, my preaching has power. When I stand on the platform and say, ‘God says,’ or ‘The Bible says,’ the Holy Spirit uses me. There are results. Wiser men than you or I have been arguing questions like this for centuries. . . . I’ve decided, once for all, to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God’s Word.”

“But, Billy,” I protested, “you can’t do that. You don’t dare stop thinking about the most important question in life. Do it and you begin to die. It’s intellectual suicide.”

“I don’t know about anybody else,” he said, “but I’ve decided that that’s the path for me.”⁵

Shortly before Templeton’s death, he sat for an interview with Christian journalist Lee Strobel. Templeton was in his eighties and in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease, though he was still able to communicate “with eloquence and enthusiasm.”⁶ Strobel asked him for his assessment of Jesus of Nazareth. Templeton seemed melancholy and almost nostalgic as he said that Jesus was “the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. . . . What could one say about him except that this was a form of greatness? . . . Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. Yes . . . yes. And tough! Just look at Jesus. He castigated people. He was angry. People don’t think of him that way, but they don’t read the Bible. He had a righteous anger. He cared

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for the oppressed and exploited. There's no question that he had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest compassion, of any human being in history."⁷

Then, his eyes flooding with tears, Templeton concluded, "And if I may put it this way, *I . . . miss . . . him.*" Then Charles Templeton wept.

After a few moments, he composed himself, dismissively waved his hand, and said with embarrassment, "Enough of that."⁸

Here was a man who had once been an evangelist, passionately devoted to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. But he had defected from the faith and become a propagandist for atheism. Yet, near the end of his life, he wept over his lost friendship with Jesus.

I wish I could say that this is the most tragic story I've ever heard. Unfortunately, it's an all-too-common story. The pattern of Charles Templeton's life has played out countless times, in millions of lost souls, ever since the human race began.

Spiritual Defection in the Old Testament

The first spiritual defection in history began the moment that Eve listened to the words of the serpent: "Did God really say . . . ?"⁹ Since then, the story of humanity has been one of apostasy, of abandoning or falling away from God and his truth.

Both the Old Testament nation of Israel and the New Testament church were constantly menaced by false teachings

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that sprang up and infected the congregation like a plague. Throughout the Scriptures, God warns his people against the danger of spiritual defection. For example, in Deuteronomy 6, God urges his people to love him and to have nothing to do with other gods. The Israelites were to meditate on God's Word, and to teach God's commands to their children when they lay down at night and when they arose in the morning. They were never to forget that God had liberated them from slavery and had blessed them in the land. But time after time, Israel ignored God's warnings and fell into apostasy and idolatry.

After Israel's exodus out of Egypt, Moses led the people to the foot of Mount Sinai. He climbed the mountain, and there he received the stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. But while Moses was on the mountain, some of the people made an idol of a golden calf. When Moses returned to the camp, he found the people worshipping the idol they had made. He angrily broke the tablets and punished the idolaters.

Many years later, after Israel conquered the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership, the people of Israel became spiritually complacent. Once again, they drifted into idol worship and rebellion against God. This was the time of the judges, when the twelve tribes of Israel had no central government and no moral leadership. Judges 17:6 tells us, "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes."¹⁰

Throughout the book of Judges, the twelve tribes of Israel follow a cyclical pattern of spiritual renewal followed

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by spiritual defection and idolatry. Whenever the Israelites began following the depraved practices of their ungodly neighbors, such as the Canaanites, Philistines, and Assyrians, God would send an enemy nation to terrorize and oppress them. In their panic and suffering, the Israelites would suddenly take God's commandments seriously. They would cry out to God for deliverance from their enemies, and God would hear their prayers and send them a deliverer. These deliverers—people such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson—were known as judges, who would deliver the Israelites in their hour of need. But as soon as the enemy nation was driven off, the people would again become spiritually complacent and disobedient—and the cycle of spiritual defection and idolatry would begin once more.

The book of 1 Samuel introduces us to Samuel, the last of the judges and the first of the biblical prophets. He would later anoint both Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel. The book of 1 Samuel contains these sobering words: “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.”¹¹ Because the people had defected from God, he was silent and he sent them no visions, no word to guide them.

Under the leadership of King David and his son and successor King Solomon, the city of Jerusalem and its great Temple became the headquarters for worship of the one true God. The kingdom of Israel experienced a golden age under Solomon's godly leadership—at least, for most of his life. Solomon started out well, building and dedicating the great Temple to the worship of the Lord. But his story eventually became a case study

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in the tragic consequences of spiritual defection, and the latter years of his reign were overshadowed by apostasy. Scripture records how Solomon's heart was led astray:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.¹²

Many Bible scholars believe that Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes later in life, perhaps after recognizing his spiritual error and repenting of it. That might explain these words:

I find more bitter than death
the woman who is a snare,
whose heart is a trap
and whose hands are chains.
The man who pleases God will escape her,
but the sinner she will ensnare.¹³

God's warning against being led into apostasy by our lusts or our false friends is reinforced by the apostle Paul in the New Testament: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.

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For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?
Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"¹⁴

Solomon's spiritual defection undoubtedly affected his moral, spiritual, and political leadership of the nation of Israel. As Solomon's heart was turned away from God, so were the hearts of the people. Solomon allowed pagan idols and temples to be built in honor of demonic gods and goddesses like Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Molek.¹⁵ The worship of these false gods was associated with gruesome child sacrifices and obscene sexual acts. As Solomon went, so went the nation of Israel.

After Solomon died and Rehoboam became king, the kingdom of Israel was divided by tribal conflict. Ten tribes broke away and formed the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Shechem (and later at Samaria). The other two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, formed the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem. After the split, both kingdoms eventually defected from God and turned to idol worship.

The most important prophet in the northern kingdom was Elijah, who lived in the ninth century BC during the reign of wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon. It was a time of heartbreaking apostasy as the people were led into the worship of Baal by their corrupted king and pagan queen. At Mount Carmel, Elijah set up a contest between himself (as a prophet of God) and the priests of Baal, in which both sides prepared a sacrifice and called upon their respective deities to send fire to consume their sacrifice.

From morning until evening, the pagan priests prayed and

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wailed and cut themselves with knives, but Baal remained silent. When at last Elijah called upon the Lord, fire immediately rained down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. Having defeated the false priests, Elijah ordered their execution.

When Queen Jezebel heard what had happened, she placed a bounty on Elijah's head, sending him fleeing for his life into the wilderness. There he took refuge in a cave.

In 1 Kings 19:9, the Lord appears to Elijah in the cave and asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Discouraged and lonely, Elijah replies, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."¹⁶ Elijah honestly believed that he was the only believer left in all of Israel.

The Lord sent Elijah out on a mountain and showed him a series of powerful events. A mighty wind shattered mountains and rocks—but the Lord was not in the wind. Then came fire and an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the fire nor was he in the earthquake. Then Elijah heard a gentle whisper—and he knew that the Lord was in that soft whisper.¹⁷

Sometimes God acts dramatically, as when he sent fire from heaven in response to Elijah's prayer. But God's greatest power most often is demonstrated in a gentle whisper, the still, small voice of his Word. Through the Word of God, the Spirit of God speaks to the human heart, bringing a change to the heart's attitude while redirecting the human will.

Even though it seemed as if all of Israel had fallen into apostasy and idolatry, God wanted Elijah to know that there

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was still a faithful remnant in Israel who had heard the gentle whisper of God's Word. God told Elijah, "I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."¹⁸

Despite Elijah's victory on Mount Carmel and his warning to the people, the northern kingdom continued to drift away from God. Finally, in 722 BC, after a three-year siege, the Assyrians conquered Samaria and took the ten tribes of the northern kingdom into captivity in Assyria. There, the tribes were absorbed into the surrounding pagan culture and never returned to the Promised Land. They are known to history as the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Even when it seems that we're surrounded by apostates and enemies, even when it seems we're alone and that everyone around us has defected, we must remember God's message to Elijah. Listen for the gentle whisper of the Spirit. Remember that God always reserves a remnant of faithful followers for himself. Therefore, stand strong in your faithfulness to the Lord, so that you will always be counted among God's faithful remnant.

Spiritual Defection Leads to Enslavement

Apostasy was also rampant in the southern kingdom of Judah. The spiritual life of the nation hit bottom during the era of the prophet Jeremiah. He warned the leaders and the people of Judah that destruction and enslavement awaited them if they did not repent of their idolatry.

God was amazingly patient with Judah. Jeremiah preached

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and warned the nation for about forty years—a period that spanned the reign of five kings: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Yet the people not only worshiped the Phoenician god Baal and the Hittite goddess Asherah, they even sacrificed their own innocent children to the Canaanite demon-god Molek.

God spoke to Jeremiah and gave him a message for the nation. The essence of God's warning to Judah is summed up in these words:

“Your wickedness will punish you;
your backsliding will rebuke you.
Consider then and realize
how evil and bitter it is for you
when you forsake the LORD your God
and have no awe of me,”
declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.¹⁹

In the Septuagint—the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, written about two hundred years before Christ—the word translated “backsliding” in English is *apostasia* in Greek, from which we get the word *apostasy*. In his message through Jeremiah, God identifies the cause of the backsliding and spiritual defection that plagued the nation: The people had no awe (or fear) of God.

During the time of Elijah, God had reserved to himself a remnant of seven thousand followers. But during the time of Jeremiah, the faithful prophet stood almost entirely alone in his effort to awaken the people to their impending doom.

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Jeremiah had only two allies who served God as faithfully as he did—Baruch the scribe and an Ethiopian eunuch named Ebed-Melek.²⁰

From a human perspective, Jeremiah spent forty years wasting his breath. Not a single person turned to God in repentance. Finally, the officials of King Zedekiah seized him, threw him in a cistern filled with mud, and left him to die. Jeremiah was rescued from the cistern by Ebed-Melek, though he remained in captivity until the Babylonian army captured Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Babylonians destroyed the city and slaughtered or enslaved most of the people (just as God had warned), but they set Jeremiah free.

After seventy years in captivity under the Babylonians and the Persians (who conquered the Babylonians), the Israelites were set free by a decree of the Persian king Cyrus the Great. The book of Nehemiah describes how, under Nehemiah's leadership, the Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city walls that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Nehemiah 8 tells the story of a revival that swept the nation, but by chapter 13, the people of Jerusalem have already become spiritually lukewarm and are drifting toward apostasy again.

Between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, the nation of Israel had fallen into such a wretched spiritual state that when the long-awaited Messiah finally appeared, the leaders and the people didn't accept him. From the beginning to the end of his public ministry, Jesus faced constant opposition and threats from the very religious leaders who should have recognized him from the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament and welcomed him.

Spiritual Defection in the New Testament

In the New Testament, we see apostasy in the lives of the people who crowded around Jesus as he walked and taught and preached the gospel of the Kingdom. John 6 vividly illustrates how spiritual defection works. First, the apostle John tells us that “a great crowd of people followed [Jesus] because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick.”²¹ People were attracted by the miracles of Jesus, including the feeding of the five thousand.²²

Later, when Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum on the opposite shore, the crowds tracked him down. There, Jesus told them:

Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. . . . I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.²³

Jesus was talking to people who followed him, who were excited about him, who were eager to receive things from him, but who did not believe in him. They wanted the bread he provided at the feeding of the five thousand,

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but they would not receive *him* as the everlasting Bread of Life. They showed up, hoping he would work miracles, but they didn't want to hear the truth he proclaimed. They wanted his social gospel—the free food distribution—but they didn't want his spiritual gospel, the food that would endure to eternal life.

After these followers listened to Jesus preach about himself—for example, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them”²⁴—many of them said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”²⁵

Then John records a sad commentary on these disappointed followers: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”²⁶ In other words, they defected. They fell into apostasy.

Only a small, faithful band of followers remained after the rest turned away. They stayed not because Jesus performed miracles and fed the masses, but because they believed in the Good News of eternal life through faith in him. When Jesus asked the twelve disciples if they too wanted to leave him, Simon Peter summed up their faith in these words: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”²⁷

When we speak of apostasy or defection from the Christian faith, we are referring to those who reject the claims of Jesus Christ. Many people approve of Jesus, say nice things about

Jesus, and perhaps even try to follow his moral teachings, yet they reject what he taught about himself and who he is. Even some atheists claim to admire the moral teachings of Jesus while rejecting his claims. For example, biologist and well-known spokesman for atheism Richard Dawkins writes, “Jesus, if he existed . . . was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His ‘turn the other cheek’ anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years.”²⁸ But Jesus didn’t come to earth to be a “great ethical innovator,” and to be an admirer of his is not the same as being a believer and a follower.

Sadly, there are even many pastors, theologians, and writers who call themselves Christians yet reject the claims of Christ. But anyone who purports to follow Jesus while rejecting his claims is a defector and an apostate. The people who followed Jesus around first-century Judea and Galilee, marveled at his miracles, and ate the bread he broke, but walked away from his teachings about himself, were apostate. And the people today who want us to follow Jesus’ moral and social teachings while denying his claims about himself are equally apostate.

What Did Jesus Claim about Himself?

When Jesus told the crowds that had gathered who he was, they were shocked—and many were offended. Here was this nobody from nowhere, this carpenter’s son from Nazareth, proclaiming in his backwoods Galilean accent that he was the

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long-awaited Messiah and equal to God himself! The claims Jesus made were so specific and so shocking that many people today—including many who say they are Christians—still find them offensive and try to downplay them or ignore them.

What are these claims that are so provocative?

Jesus said he came from heaven and that he existed eternally.²⁹ He said he was sent into the world by God the Father.³⁰ He claimed to be eternally coexistent with God the Father, even before the creation of the world.³¹ He claimed to be the Savior of the world; the way, the truth, and the life; and the only way to God the Father.³²

Further, he claimed to be the Messiah long promised in the Old Testament Scriptures.³³ He claimed to be the resurrection and the life.³⁴ According to Scripture, it was the Spirit of God who caused Mary, the mother of Jesus, to become pregnant while a virgin.³⁵ At Jesus' baptism, both God the Father and the Holy Spirit affirmed him to be the Son of God.³⁶ His claim to deity was confirmed by both Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament fulfillment of that prophecy—a prophecy that Jesus would be called *Immanuel*, meaning, “God with us.”³⁷

Jesus claimed the right *as God* to be worshiped by humanity, and the right to judge the human race.³⁸ Jesus claimed to be without sin.³⁹ Jesus claimed—and demonstrated—divine authority over disease, death, the wind and waves, and demonic spirits.⁴⁰ Jesus claimed to have the power and authority to rise from the dead.⁴¹ He claimed the authority to forgive sins, an authority that belongs to God alone.⁴²

When Peter told Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of

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the living God,” Jesus blessed him and told him, “This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”⁴³ Yet the religious leaders, hearing these same claims, plotted to kill Jesus because “he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”⁴⁴ He claimed to be equal *with* God and eternal *as* God. In short, he claimed to *be* God.⁴⁵ The religious leaders understood that if the claims of Jesus were untrue, they were blasphemous.

This is the same reasoning C. S. Lewis followed when he formulated his so-called trilemma (or three-sided problem) in *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁴⁶

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Some have misunderstood the point of Lewis's trilemma, saying it doesn't prove that Jesus was who he claimed to be. Of course it doesn't. Lewis wasn't trying to *prove* anything by his statement. He simply wanted us to understand that we can't have it both ways. We can't say, "Jesus was a great moral teacher, but he was not the Son of God." We can't say, "Jesus was a great social reformer, but he is not the only way to God the Father." We can't say, "I'm a Christian, but I don't believe in Jesus as my Lord and Savior." We cannot cherry-pick the teachings of Jesus, selecting the ones that fit our political and social biases while ignoring his claim to be the Savior and the only way to God the Father.

If Jesus was a deliberate liar, he could not be a great moral teacher. If he was merely a human being who *thought* he was God, he would not be a great moral teacher; he would be delusional, and all his teachings would be unreliable and tainted by madness and megalomania. If you reject Jesus' claims to be sinless, to be eternally existent, to be God in human flesh, to have authority to both forgive and judge human beings—if you reject all that, you have no basis for accepting *anything else* that Jesus said. And you have no basis for calling yourself a Christian.

You might ask, "How do we know that Jesus really said everything attributed to him in the Bible? Maybe the Sermon on the Mount is accurate but John 3:16 is not. Why can't we just follow our favorite sayings of Jesus and ignore the ones we don't like?" The answer is obvious. By doing so, we are not following Jesus. We are merely using Jesus to rubber-stamp our own biases, preferences, and moral weaknesses. We are trying

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to conform Jesus to our own image instead of conforming ourselves to his. The Gospels are the only objective basis we have for verifying the words of Jesus, and the Gospel accounts are harmonious and reliable. Reject *anything* that Jesus said about himself and we forfeit any claim to be his followers.

It's the entire gospel or none at all—that's the choice Jesus set before us. All or nothing, take it or leave it. Believe everything he said and organize your life around it, or go your own way. Either Jesus is God, as he says he is, or he's a liar or a lunatic. Those are your only three options. Choose carefully. But don't try to remake Jesus into something more comfortable. As Lewis said, Jesus has not left that option open to us. He didn't intend to.

Remember these defining words of Jesus: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."⁴⁷ But if you choose *not* to hold to his teachings—*all* of them—where does that leave you? If you reject *any* of his teachings, how can you call yourself a Christian?

Insulate Yourself against Apostasy

When someone comes to faith in Jesus Christ and makes a commitment to him as Lord and Savior, that change of heart is called *conversion*. Authentic conversion means more than merely agreeing with a set of creeds or doctrines *about* Jesus. It means accepting his lordship. It means a humble and absolute surrender of the will to Jesus.

Once a person has experienced that change of heart

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and has accepted the lordship and authority of Jesus Christ over his or her life, any later rejection of Jesus' lordship and authority becomes an act of defection, rebellion, or falling away. Apostasy is a willful departure from biblical Christian faith. It is the opposite of conversion.

Now, does this mean that we, as Christians, can lose our salvation? No! God's grace to us is an unearned, unmerited gift. Thanks be to God, he never reneges on his gift to those who truly believe.

"But," you may ask, "what about Charles Templeton? After coming to Christ, after founding and pastoring a church, after cofounding Youth for Christ and preaching on the same platform with Billy Graham, after leading many people to the Lord, didn't he defect from the faith? Didn't he die in unbelief? Didn't he lose his salvation?" These are good questions, and there are no simple answers. But there *are* sound, biblical answers.

First, we don't know the state of Charles Templeton's heart when he died. We know that, not long before his death, he told Lee Strobel that he still admired Jesus—and he missed Jesus. God alone knows whether Templeton died in a state of belief or a state of unbelief and condemnation. God knows, and he rightly judges the heart.

Second, we don't know the state of Charles Templeton's heart when he made his original profession of faith. Was his faith genuine? Again, only God knows. We cannot claim to know.

But one thing we *do* know is what Jesus taught us: "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will

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of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, *that I shall lose none of all those he has given me*, but raise them up at the last day.”⁴⁸

The Scriptures tell us that God “predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”⁴⁹ The Scriptures also say that “those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”⁵⁰ From a human perspective, we make the decision to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior of our own free will. But from a heavenly perspective, the reason we make that choice is because *God first chose us*.

If God the Father called and chose Charles Templeton and gave him to Jesus the Son, then Charles Templeton is saved, justified, and glorified with Christ. But if Charles Templeton died unsaved and in a state of unbelief, then God the Father never called, chose, or gave Charles Templeton to Jesus the Son in the first place.

That is why the apostle Peter urges us, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble.”⁵¹ Don’t take your salvation for granted. Don’t assume that because you “made a decision” for Christ way back when that you are truly saved. Heed the example of Charles Templeton and take it as a warning. I would hate for you to come to the end of your life and confess through tears, as he did, “I miss Jesus!” Make sure that God has truly called you and chosen you by remaining faithful to the end. If you do that, the Bible promises, you will never fall away from the faith.

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How can we remain faithful to God, who loves us so generously and freely? The book of Jude tells us how to walk faithfully with God throughout our days.

First, *remain faithful by knowing God's truth and by being skeptical of false doctrines.* Jude writes, "Dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, 'In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.' These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit."⁵² Steep yourself in the Word of God and test every teaching against Scripture. Be on guard against falsehood and smooth talk and those who offer some new twist on Christianity. Don't accept any "new" gospel—the emerging gospel, the social gospel, the prosperity gospel, or any other gospel—as a substitute for the *true* gospel of salvation by grace through faith.

Second, *insulate yourself against unbelief* "by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit."⁵³ Set aside time to develop a deep intimacy with God and his Word. Spend time alone with the Bible. Books and sermons cannot take the place of feeding directly on the Word of God. Also, linger with God in prayer. Never let anything—not even your family or ministry—take the place of time alone with God. If you neglect your time with God, your spiritual life will wither and dry up. You won't lose your salvation, but you will almost certainly miss out on the blessings God wants to pour into your life.

When the prodigal son wandered away from his father, he did not lose his father's love, but he suffered terribly. He

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missed out on the blessings of living closely and intimately with his father. The prodigal son forfeited the joy of daily experiencing the warmth of his father's love. When you spend time away from your heavenly Father, you will inevitably suffer. You'll suffer mental anguish and emotional despondency. You'll suffer the painful consequences of the bad choices you make when you cut yourself off from God's wisdom and guidance. So insulate yourself against unbelief by spending time in prayer and in God's Word.

Third, *insulate yourself against bad influences*. Especially beware of those who know the truth but have turned their backs on it. After Charles Templeton turned his back on Christianity, he argued with Billy Graham and tried to convince Billy to turn away from Jesus as well. In fact, Templeton's persistent attacks on the Bible triggered a crisis of doubt that Billy Graham could resolve only by praying a prayer of committed faith.

The Scriptures warn, "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 and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."⁵⁴ Beware those who have fallen away and want to drag you down with them.

Fourth, *insulate yourself from falsehood by boldly sharing the truth with others*. Be a witness to those who are outside the church. Be a teacher and an encourager to those who

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are inside the church. Jude tells us, “Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.”⁵⁵

When struggling believers share their doubts with you, don’t shame them or make them feel guilty for doubting. Be merciful and kind, but teach them the truth about God’s Word and God’s Son. Pray for wisdom and God’s love, and then speak the truth to them in love. When you encounter people who are outside the faith, don’t be embarrassed, shy, or afraid to tell them, “God loves you and sent his Son, Jesus, to die for you. He wants to take away your guilt and sin, and he wants to be your Father and your friend forever.”

When was the last time you shared Christ with someone? Are you involved in the lives of lost and hurting people? Is your heart moved by the many unsaved people in the world around you? The more often you share God’s love with others, the less likely you will be to lapse into error and fall away from the truth.

Jude closes his letter with a beautiful and reassuring hymn of praise to God, the one who will never let us fall out of his grace: “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”⁵⁶

The Lord is able to keep you from falling. He has called you and chosen you, and he will not let you go. Make sure you don’t let go of him.