

Can A True Believer Totally Depart From the Faith?

Can a Saved Person Reject Jesus Christ, Renounce the Gospel and Totally Abandon His Faith in Christ?

The free grace movement has contributed much of value to the correct understanding of the gospel. They have exalted the grace of God and have rejected any system of meritorious works. They have made a clear distinction between the demands of discipleship which involve the believer's sanctification and the terms of the gospel which relate to justification. They have preached faith in Christ alone as the sole condition for salvation.¹ They have rightly rejected Lordship salvation which adds additional requirements to salvation which go beyond simple faith in Christ.²

There is, however, at least one aspect of free grace teaching that is of great concern. This is their teaching that a true believer can totally depart from the faith. While we fully recognize that a true believer can fall into very serious sin and carnality, yet they take this a giant step further. They teach that it is possible for a true believer to actually reject Jesus Christ as God's only Saviour and totally reject the gospel of the grace of God. They say that a genuine believer can stop believing in Christ, can teach against Christianity and can even blaspheme the Christ he once claimed to know. They admit the possibility of a real believer abandoning Christ totally and becoming a Catholic or Buddhist or Muslim or Mormon or Jehovah's Witness or an atheist. As one leading free grace teacher said, "Christ will never let go of you, but you can let go of Him."

Free grace teachers have different ways of explaining this total departure from the faith. Here are some of their explanations:

Consider Believer A who first believes on Christ on his deathbed and then dies one day later. Believer B believes on Christ for one month and then falls away and becomes totally apostate and no longer believes in Christ. Both Believer A and Believer B will go to heaven. Believer B actually believed in Christ for much longer than Believer A. Believer B believed for one month whereas Believer A believed in Christ for only one day, so in this sense

¹Some free grace men, however, reject Biblical repentance as a necessary condition of salvation. They teach that only faith, not repentance, is required for salvation. Yet, true saving faith includes Biblical repentance. See <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/termsrep.htm>

²On the Middletown Bible Church website we have written extensively on these topics. See <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/salvatio.htm>.

Believer B's faith endured even longer than Believer A's faith.³

I suppose the point of this illustration is that it's possible for the faith of an apostate to actually endure longer than the faith of a dying believer who was only saved for one day. But the real issue at hand is not how long a person's faith endures, but whether it is possible for a genuine believer to totally reject Jesus Christ.

Another example involves a "genuine believer" who went to Japan, married a Japanese girl, got caught up in Buddhism and started worshiping idols. Free grace men believe that this man is saved even though he totally departed from the faith, abandoned Christ, embraced false gods, and repudiated the Bible. They believe it is possible for such person to absolutely reject the truth of God and be saved as long as he at one time professed faith in Christ.

A Biblical example often cited is that of Solomon. Solomon married foreign wives who influenced him to turn his heart away from the Lord and to allow significant idolatry which incurred God's anger (1 Kings 11). Some free grace men argue that Solomon never repented of this evil. We will discuss the case of Solomon later.

Another example of a supposed total departure from the faith was given by the late Zane Hodges, a very influential free grace teacher. Hodges' illustration was given in a tape series which he delivered while speaking at the Church of the Open Door which at the time was pastored by G. Michael Cocoris. The series of tapes is entitled, "Great Themes in the Book of Hebrews" (available through Redencion Viva Publishers). On the tape entitled "The Peril of Not Growing" Hodges discusses the great warning passage found in Hebrews chapter 6 and he gives this personal illustration:

I have a friend, and more than a friend, a man who labored with me side by side in the ministry of God's Word in the little group that has become _____ Bible Chapel and this friend has fallen away from the Christian faith. He graduated from Bob Jones University and from Dallas Theological Seminary. And about the time when he and his wife left Dallas his wife contracted a very serious illness which over the years got progressively worse until she was reduced to being a complete invalid, and after the death of his wife I visited my friend (who now lives in the Midwest and who teaches Ancient History in a secular university). And as we sat in the living room together, face to face, he told me very frankly but graciously ***that he no longer claimed to be a Christian at all, that he no longer believed the things that he once preached and taught***, and the situation was even worse than he described because I heard through others that in the classroom on the university campus he often mocked and ridiculed the Christian faith. As I sat in that living room I was very painfully aware that it was impossible for me to talk that man into changing his mind. It was impossible for me to talk him back to the conviction he had once held. ***It was impossible*** for me to renew him to repentance. You want to find someone harder to deal with than an unsaved person? Find a person like that....

³This illustration was sent to me in a personal letter by a nationally known free grace preacher.

Oh how disgraceful for a man to have known the truth and proclaimed the truth and then to deny the truth! He has put the Son of God to an open shame! Well you say, "I guess he's headed for hell, right? I guess he's headed for eternal damnation. He's renounced his Christian faith." Wait a minute. I didn't say that, and neither does the writer of Hebrews. Let me remind you that Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He that cometh to Me shall never hunger and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst" and He also said, "He that cometh to Me I shall in no wise cast out".... God's will is that He lose no one (John 6:37-40). ***He has never lost anyone and He never will! And I grieve because my friend and brother has lost his faith but Christ has not lost him.*** Do you believe in the grace of God? [emphasis mine]

We would all agree that this was a very sad and tragic case. It grieves the heart of every believer to see a man totally reject the things of Christ, the very Christ he once claimed to love. It must have been a heartbreaking experience for Hodges who once considered this man a co-laborer. Here was a man who no longer even professed that he knew God! He totally denied the Christian faith. He even mocked and ridiculed the Christian faith, that is, he taught against the truth of Christianity! Hodges believed that such a person could totally defect from the faith (total apostasy) and completely withdraw his Christian profession, and would ultimately be saved (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 795). This sad case exemplifies this teaching. It is also possible that this apostate was never truly saved in the first place, in spite of his initial profession. Not all who profess Christ actually possess Christ (Titus 1:16). See Appendix 3, "Is It Wrong To Question a Person's Profession of Faith?"

Question:

Can a true believer (a truly saved person) stop believing and revert back to being an unbeliever?

A saved person in Scripture is often referred to as a "believer" (Acts 5:14; 1 Tim. 4:12). How can a person be a believer and not believe? How can a saved person be a Christ-rejecting unbeliever? How can a saved person be a Christ-denying unbeliever? If he is an unbeliever, then isn't he, by definition, unsaved, in light of John 3:18, 3:36 and 8:24?

How can a person totally reject the truth of God and the gospel of grace and be a saved believer? Isn't a believer one who stands on the foundation of **who Christ is, what Christ has done and what Christ has said**? If a person departs from this foundation and becomes a total apostate, then how could he be a saved person?

If the apostate says, "I totally reject Jesus Christ and do not believe that He is God" then based on John 8:24, will not this person die in his sins? According to John 3:36, will not the wrath of God abide on the unbeliever? According to John 3:18, will not the unbeliever be condemned? If the so-called "believer" has become a Christ-rejecting unbeliever, then would not all of God's warnings to unbelievers apply to him? An "unbelieving believer" is a contradiction of terms. Believers can be "unbelieving" in the sense that they don't always trust the Lord as they should ("Oh ye of little faith" etc.), but not in the sense of willfully denying the Person and work of Jesus Christ and utterly rejecting the gospel.

If a person does not “hold fast” to the gospel message, then according to Paul he is not saved. He has believed in vain (1 Cor. 15:1-2). We are kept by the power of God, but God keeps us “through faith” (1 Pet. 1:5) not apart from faith. He not only keeps us saved but He keeps us believing in Christ as Saviour. Our faith may be very weak but it does not utterly fail. The person who does not “hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:6,14) proves that he is not part of Christ’s true house (v. 6). He was just a temporary attachment (mere scaffolding). We can tell that scaffolding is not part of the true building because after a time it falls away and does not continue with the building (see 1 John 2:19 and Luke 8:13). Christ interceded for Peter, “that thy faith fail not” and does not the Lord intercede for all believers in the same way? Does His prayer go unanswered in some cases? Is Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith or is He just the Author of our faith?

It is absolutely true that believers may fail and fall in many ways, even many serious ways. Many examples of this are cited in my booklet, *Saved By Grace Alone—An Answer to Lordship Salvation*.⁴ Solomon, Asa, Lot, Peter, David, Aaron, and others are all examples. That true believers can fail and fall into serious sin is obvious (though we wish it were more obvious to Lordship advocates). The issue is, can a truly saved person totally deny the faith and totally abandon Christ? If this is possible, then why isn’t Judas a saved man? What makes Judas worse than other total apostates?⁵

A saved person, by definition, is one who is trusting in the finished work of Christ. He may have failed Christ in a million ways during his lifetime, and he may have accumulated wagon loads of wood, hay and stubble, but if asked on his deathbed, “Who are you trusting? What is your hope?” he will answer, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” How can he say anything less? Suppose you visited a man on his deathbed without knowing his past history and you ask, “Are you trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour?” The man’s response is this: “Absolutely not! I hate the Christian faith. I don’t believe in Christ and I don’t believe that He is the Son of God and I totally reject Him. I don’t believe this myth that He died as a Substitute for man’s sins. The Bible was written by men and is full of lies. I have no use for it whatsoever. I hate Christianity.” Would you not conclude that this is an unsaved person? Suppose that later you learned that at age 20 this man professed faith in Christ and attended a Bible-believing church and even witnessed to others for a couple of years before he renounced the faith and turned away from Christ and the Bible. Would you then declare him to be saved based on his early profession? Why would his early profession be more valuable than his latter profession? Why do we believe his early profession of faith but not believe his later denial of the faith?

<p style="text-align:center">The Parable of the Sower The Stony Ground Hearer—A True Believer?</p>

Free grace teachers have a unique understanding of the parable of the sower. Most Bible teachers say that it is the seed on the good ground that represents the saved person and that the other three

⁴See <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/lordship.pdf>

⁵I’m convinced that if Christ had not made it very clear that Judas was an unsaved, unregenerate man (John 13:10-11; 17:12), free grace teachers would place him among the redeemed. Why should other total apostates enter into heaven, but not Judas?

soils represent unsaved people. Free grace teachers insist that the seed that fell upon the roadside (the hard soil) represents an unsaved person, but that the three other soils all represent saved people. This aligns with their teaching that it is possible for believers to depart from the faith (stony ground), become totally worldly (thorny ground) and in some cases be fruitful (good ground).

Let us consider the stony ground hearer. The stony ground hearer believes “for a while” but then falls away. In Luke 8:13 the expression “believe” must be understood in its context. It clearly says that “[they] for a while believe.” The faith that is spoken of here is qualified. It is a “for a while faith” or a temporary faith. There is a difference between genuine saving faith and faith that is spurious and short-lived.

It’s important to realize that the stony ground hearer was in that condition from the start. When the seed was scattered, it did not fall on good ground first and then at a later time the ground became stony and bad. The ground was stony and bad from the start. It was never good ground. There were never any roots. The rock ledge was there from the beginning. This is contrary to the teaching of Hodges which says that at the beginning everything was fine and good and that the person truly believed on the Lord Jesus, and that this faith was good and valid. It was not good and valid. Even from the very beginning it had no roots. Even from the beginning the conditions were not suitable for a good reception of the Word.

Thus Walvoord says that “the seed on shallow ground pictured superficial reception of the Word” (*Matthew—Thy Kingdom Come*, page 99). Ryrie pointed out that some believers think that “carnality can be lifelong and so total that carnal believers will never bear any fruit and yet be genuinely saved. But that is not true, for all believers will bear fruit, some thirty-, some sixty-, and some one hundred-fold (Matt. 13:8). Otherwise, they do not possess the new life” (*So Great Salvation*, p.59).

Arno Gaebelein speaks of the rocky ground: “It is the great class of professing Christians. They are covering over this old, desperately wicked heart with a little earth. They put on the form of godliness, while they know nothing of its power. There is also a great deal of enthusiasm, a springing up of the seed; it looks almost as if there is to be a great result—but alas! There is only the name to live, but death is behind it” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, pages 272-273). Gaebelein thus taught that the stony ground hearer represented an unbeliever. F.W. Grant in his *Numerical Bible* takes the same position.

Homer Kent, my professor at Grace Seminary, taught the same (see his Matthew commentary in the *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*). Here is what L.S. Chafer said about this parable (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, page 296): “Whatever seeming reality may be attached to the experience of those who are represented by that which fell by the wayside, or by seed that fell in stony places, or by seed that fell among thorns, the determining test is that these did not mature into wheat, as did the seed which fell into good ground....That Word does move many superficially, but those who are saved by it are likened to wheat.” He describes the other three types of ground (hard, stony and thorny) as “the three failures.” See also William Kelly’s discussion of the Luke 8 passage in *The Gospel of Luke*, pages 125-126.

I have been criticized for agreeing with Reformed men on my understanding of the stony ground hearer. But as cited above, leading dispensational men have understood the passage in the same way. Of course, we would all agree that what really matters is that we agree with God and adhere to what the Bible teaches regardless of what men may or may not teach. The main purpose in quoting from some of these leading dispensationalists is to demonstrate that my position is not one that is unique

to Reformed Theology, but it is a time-tested position that was held by most dispensationalists as well. These extreme views of Zane Hodge represent a departure from traditional dispensational teaching. This happens to be an area where Reformed men and many dispensational men are in accord.

Question:

Does the word “believe” always refer to saving faith?

According to the Scriptures, there are places where the word “believe” is used but the context indicates that it is describing a faith that comes short of true saving faith. It would simplify things if the word “believe” always refers to saving faith, but it does not.

Some examples of this follow:

1) Of the stony ground hearers, Luke 8:13 says that they believed “for a while.” This “temporary” faith is spurious and comes short of true saving faith.

2) In 1 Corinthians 15:2, Paul speaks of a faith that is “in vain.” These “believers” failed to hold fast to the gospel which Paul preached. They believed in vain. Their faith fell short of saving faith. “The Apostle is not implying that some of the Corinthian believers were lost for want of faith; rather it is that their faith has never been sufficient for salvation” (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296). I’ll discuss this passage in more detail later.

3) In John 2:23 there were many who “believed in His Name when they saw the miracles which He did.” Was this saving faith or did it come short of saving faith? It was a faith based on miracles which they saw. This faith, which was based on miracles, came short of saving faith for two reasons: 1. Even though they believed in Him, He did not believe in them (same verb used)! He did not commit himself to them (v. 24). He knew what was in them. He could see right past their shallow faith. 2. One of these people who had a faith based on miracles was Nicodemus (3:1-2): “We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him.” This faith that he had (a faith in miracles) did not measure up to saving faith. The Lord told him he must be born again.

4) In John 8:31 Jesus spoke to those Jews who believed on Him. Is this describing true saving faith? There is strong indications in the context that He continues to speak to this same group of Jews all the way to the point where He tells them that they are children of the devil (verse 44)! How can true believers be children of the devil?

It is clear that in verses 31-32 He is speaking to those Jews who believed in Him. Yet, immediately the Lord seemed to challenge the genuineness of their faith, by telling them that true, genuine disciples are those who continue in His word (v.31) and true, genuine disciples are those who will know true freedom from sin (v. 32). As we continue reading in this passage it becomes obvious that they did not continue in His Word.

In John 8:33 who does the “they” refer to? Free grace men seek to make this pronoun refer to

unbelievers. However, it more likely refers to the same “believers” who heard Him say, “The truth shall make you free” (v. 32) because they took up on this and said, “We were never in bondage to any man.” As you continue to read verses 33-44 it is obvious that these Jews were very antagonistic to Christ and ultimately they were declared to be unsaved (“ye are of your father the devil” etc.). If we say that those in verse 31 were true believers, then how do we explain the following context? Homer Kent sees this same problem: “This raises the question of whether it was true saving faith....No clear transition can be seen here between different groups of Jews....Apparently the sense is that these who believed in Jesus had come to a sort of mental acceptance, but not to any personal trust” (*Light in the Darkness*, page 126).

5) In James chapter 2 James speaks of a “dead faith” which is fruitless and barren and destitute of good works. He also speaks of demons “who believe and tremble.”

6) Simon believed and was baptized (Acts 8:13). Was this saving faith? The words of Peter seem extremely harsh and strong for anyone but a wicked unbeliever (verses 20-23): “Thy money perish with thee”—this implies that Simon was going to perish. Literal translation: “Thy silver be with thee into perdition.” “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter.” Peter had just been talking about God’s gift of salvation, and if Simon had no part in that he must have been unsaved. For a full discussion of the case of Simon the Sorcerer, see Appendix 1.

Question:

What about the example of Solomon? Wasn’t he an example of a believer who totally departed from the faith? Did Solomon ever repent?

Even though Solomon failed miserably and broke God’s commandments, he never totally renounced Jehovah.

Some suggest that Solomon became a polytheist, still including Jehovah in his belief system but believing in other gods as well. However, if Solomon had become a polytheist, then he would have become a total apostate. He would have rejected Jehovah as being **the only true God**, and would have dragged Him down to the level of other pagan deities which are not gods at all. I do not believe Solomon became a total apostate, nor do I believe that he became a polytheist. Solomon allowed for the worship of false deities in his kingdom and tolerated and perhaps encouraged the building of their places of worship, but Solomon knew who the one true God was. There is no evidence that he ever really believed in his own heart that the gods of the other nations were real and worthy of devotion and love.

Solomon’s case is certainly amazing and of great interest. His fall into sin was deplorable and inexcusable, especially in view of the great light which he had, both from his father and from the wisdom he had received from Jehovah Himself. I have never seen anyone from the Lordship salvation camp deal adequately with “the Solomon problem.” He certainly was a very clear example of a “Lordship failure.”

I do not, however, consider Solomon an example of a true believer who totally departed from the faith and who “stopped believing” in the true and only God. I say this for the following reasons:

It is very unlikely that God would have ever said what He did about Solomon in Nehemiah 13:26 if Solomon had been a total apostate. Also this verse very specifically indicates what Solomon's sin was. It was the sin of taking unto himself foreign wives (v. 25) and that these wives caused him to sin. It does not say that his sin was that of totally abandoning Jehovah. Certainly he was guilty of breaking God's commandments, but so was his father David in his acts of adultery and murder.

Although Solomon had a great fall, he did not have a fatal fall. Although he fell down very hard on the ship of faith, he did get back up. Charles Bridges correctly wrote that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes late in life and that it was his document of repentance. Ecclesiastes was to Solomon as Psalm 51 was to David. Bridges said the following:

He seemeth to have written it in his old age, when he took a more serious view of his past life. It could not have been written before his fall—that is—before that awful state of madness, which he so graphically describes. Neither could it have been penned at the time, since it evidently is a record of the past reviewed in penitence. We are thrown back therefore upon the later date with clear conviction. Add to which—he mentions his great works (the building of which employed upwards of 25 years of his life)—his immense riches and multiplied sources of sensual pleasure (the gathering and enjoyment of many years); his revolt from women—doubtless with the poignant remembrance of his sinful connection with them (7:26-28 with 1 Kings 11:3). His exquisite picture of old age (7:1-6) bears the marks of personal identity.⁶

Lightfoot agrees: “After his great fall Solomon recovered himself again by repentance and wrote his Book of Ecclesiastes, as his peculiar dirge for that his folly.”⁷

In 2 Chronicles 11:17 Solomon's “way” is identified with the way of David and is used as a pattern for the kings which would follow. If Solomon had ended up a total apostate, it is unlikely this would have been said about him.

It's hard to imagine God using a man who had become a total apostate to be the penman for three of the books found in the Bible. Of all the Bible writers that God used, we know of none that were total apostates.

According to Dr. John Whitcomb, Solomon's sin, as tragic and as inexcusable as it was, was partly due to political motivations:

The one consideration that must have overridden all others in the thinking of Solomon was the desire to establish diplomatic ties with the hundreds of city states and kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean and the Fertile Crescent. The most effective way to confirm a commercial or political treaty with a foreign king was to marry one of his daughters. Theoretically a king would think twice before offending a father-in-law (or son-in-law). This was a common and accepted practice among ancient rulers, and Solomon (contrary to the known will of God) conformed to this

⁶Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, pages viii-ix.

⁷Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, page ix, footnote.

standard.⁸ (*Solomon to the Exile*).

This suggests that one reason Solomon did what he did was not out of a desire to honor the false gods of the pagans, but because he saw political advantage in marrying these women and in tolerating and allowing for the worship of their deities. In reading 1 Kings 11, we are not told that Solomon himself personally partook in this false worship, though he certainly turned his heart away from the Lord in even allowing for such.

Without minimizing the seriousness of Solomon's sin, we can conclude that although he departed from the Lord and fell into deep sin, yet at the end of his life he repented of his folly, wrote Ecclesiastes and admonished all his readers to "fear God and keep His commandments." Thus at the end of his life he was still honoring the one and only true God. He was not a total apostate.

Question:

What about Judas? Was he an example of someone who fell away from the faith (an apostate) or was he an example of someone who never believed in the first place?

Judas never put his trust in Christ. He never exercised saving faith. He did, however, exercise a certain level of faith. Judas believed in Jesus when he saw the miracles which Jesus did (compare John 2:23; 3:2), especially since he himself may have performed some of these miracles (Matthew 10:1-8). Judas, at first, believed Jesus to be the true Messiah, and hoped that He would establish His kingdom on earth, but he never had a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

We know that Judas was never saved because the Bible clearly indicates this. He was that "unclean" disciple (John 13). He was that "son of perdition" (John 17). See also John 6:64, "But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray Him" (John 6:64).

Those who teach that total apostasy is possible for the child of God would also have to say that it is possible for a true believer to follow a course similar to that of Judas. According to their teaching, a so-called "true believer" can have some kind of attachment and nearness to the Lord at the beginning, believe for a while, and then stop believing, fall away, abandon and betray Christ and His followers, and even join forces with the enemies of the cross. Judas was never saved to begin with, but it is also true that professing believers who follow the same course Judas followed likewise were never saved to begin with. This is contrary to free grace teaching which insists that total apostates will enter heaven.

Jesus prayed in John 17:12, "While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Thy name: those that Thou gavest Me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled." The disciples are in some ways a microcosm of the entire professing church. Judas represented a man who professed to follow Christ but this profession turned out to be false. He had never truly believed in the Saviour. There are many like this in the professing church.

⁸John C. Whitcomb, *Solomon to the Exile*, pages 17-18.

However, according to free grace doctrine, there are many in the church (stony ground hearers) who genuinely or savingly believe for a time and later abandon the faith and reject Jesus Christ and fall away from the truths of the gospel. They do not continue in the faith. God, who carefully selected the twelve disciples, chose Judas for a purpose. Why didn't He also choose one man who would exemplify the stony ground hearer as one of His twelve? None of the Lord's saved disciples fit into this category. None of them totally departed from the Lord except for Judas, the one disciple who was unclean and not even saved in the first place.

Not only were all eleven disciples kept by Christ's power, but they also were kept faithful. In spite of all of their failures and falls and lapses, Christ could sum up their lives in this sweeping way: **"they have kept Thy Word"** (John 17:6). All of the twelve disciples were faithful to the end and not one abandoned the faith, except for the one who never truly believed in the first place. If the twelve were a microcosm of the professing church, then we could say that all the saved will hold fast their confidence in Christ unto the end, with the exception being those who were never truly saved in the first place, "sons of perdition" like Judas, those who drew back "unto perdition" and who did not believe unto the saving of their soul. The Bible never speaks about a group of believers who subsequently "disbelieve to the saving of their soul."

Questions Concerning Lot and King Saul

Regarding Lot, apart from the New Testament you would not have known that his righteous soul was vexed from day to day with Sodom's ungodly deeds. So what Old Testament fruit do you see in this man? And is being vexed in heart but doing nothing about it sufficient proof for you of another's salvation?

And what about King Saul? Was he saved? Did not he have "fruit" and more "evidence" than Lot ever did?

While a true apostate has never been saved, has never had genuine saving faith, there are cases no doubt that, from all outward appearances, they may only appear to be apostates, but in actuality are genuine children of God in a very bad state of soul, with their genuine faith buried deep down. We, however, can only judge, and are expected to judge and act accordingly, in our walk toward other professors, based on what we can see and know, not based on what we cannot see and cannot ultimately know.

Note too that "carnality" and "apostasy" should never be equated. The former alone may be, and sadly too often is, the unhealthy condition of genuine believers. The latter alone may be the outcome of a false professor. Carnality is thus not related to the issue of perseverance, but solely to the low spiritual, backslidden state, or lack of progression in spiritual growth, of a real believer.

Concerning Lot, we are not told a great deal about this man. We do know that Lot was vexed and tortured about what was taking place around him (2 Peter 2:7-8) and this is certainly a good sign. We also know that he himself did not personally participate in the wicked deeds of Sodom even though he was an inhabitant and citizen thereof. He did not consciously or soberly partake of the sin with his daughters, and yet guilt can be laid upon him for allowing his daughters to make him drunk. Lot

should not be classified as an apostate. If we were to find the apostate in his family it would be his wife, not Lot. It was his wife who turned back in the direction of the wickedness of Sodom. We have no record of Lot ever denying Jehovah.

What “fruit” Lot manifested in his life is hard to find, but apparently there was some because Abraham knew that Lot was a righteous man. Abraham’s intercessory prayer in Genesis 18 (“If twenty righteous be in that city....,” etc.) would indicate this. Surely when Abraham said these words Lot was the one he had in mind and he considered him to be a righteous man in that city. Since Abraham could not see Lot’s faith, there must have been some other way he knew that Lot was a righteous man. But we are not told what evidences of faith Abraham saw in Lot’s life.

I would certainly use Lot (and have used him) as a “Lordship salvation failure” (a saved man who failed to surrender to God’s authority over his life), and yet I would not use him as an example of a total apostate.

Concerning King Saul, as we observe the Bible’s description of this man’s life, we find multiple evidences, not of salvation, but of the works of the flesh, in spite of the fact that the Spirit came upon him at times. Saul was an example of a man totally dominated by the works of the flesh. Good men disagree as to whether King Saul was saved, but I would classify him as unregenerate. The fact that the Spirit of God came upon Saul is no evidence that he was saved. In 1 Samuel 19:18-24 Saul was pursuing David to try to kill him. It was during this very time when Saul had murderous plans for David that the Spirit of God came upon Saul and others, causing them to prophesy. After this Saul was even more determined to kill David, and became so angry that he even tried to kill his own son Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:33). So the fact that the Spirit of God was involved with Saul on several occasions does not indicate that he was a saved man. From Scripture we know much more about King Saul than we do about Lot, and from what we do know about Saul, the overwhelming evidences of his life reveal a man who was totally dominated by the works of the flesh “of which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they who (keep on) doing such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21).

Question:

What is 2 Peter 3:17 teaching? Can “beloved” believers fall from their own steadfastness due to false teaching?

It is true that 2 Peter 3:17-18 is addressed to true believers and that true believers can fall from their own steadfastness due to false teaching. True believers can fall into doctrinal error. There are examples of this in our own day. I believe that John MacArthur is a saved man who has fallen into serious doctrinal error (denial of eternal Sonship, his one-nature position, his teaching of limited atonement, his Lordship salvation teaching, etc.).⁹ On the other side, Zane Hodges, whom I consider to have been a saved man and exemplary in his Christian life, also fell into serious doctrinal error. Examples would be his teaching that true believers could experience weeping and gnashing of teeth and that some carnal believers would fail to inherit the kingdom, etc. I would not place either of these men in the category of being a total apostate, one who has departed from the Christian faith

⁹See our study, over 100 pages, on *The Teachings of John MacArthur*.

and rejected Jesus Christ and totally abandoned the truth of the gospel.

Yes, a true believer can fall into error, even very serious doctrinal error. A true believer can fall into sin, even very serious sin. But a true believer will not completely abandon Christ and become a total apostate to the point where he “stops believing” the gospel or even teaches contrary to the gospel. On the ship of faith, believers can fall down very hard on the deck, but they will not fall overboard.

Question:

We know that salvation is forever, but does this mean that one’s faith will also endure?

Yes, salvation is forever and yes, true saving faith does endure. That is, a truly saved person will continue in the faith to the end. Christ prays for Peter (and for us) that our faith will not fail. We are kept by the power of God **through faith** unto our final salvation (1 Pet. 1:5). A true believer will not stop believing. A true believer will not reject and totally abandon Jesus Christ.

We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). We are not saved by grace apart from faith. We are not saved by grace whether we believe or not. Faith is part of the salvation formula and no one is saved apart from faith.

Not only are we saved by grace, but we are kept by grace. But how does God keep us? Does He keep us apart from faith? Does He keep us whether we believe or not? Or, are we kept by grace through faith? In 1 Peter 1:5 we are told that we are kept by the power of God **through faith**. [Literally: “we are constantly being kept through faith.”] This means that God by His power keeps us saved and keeps us safe. How does He do this? God by His grace and by His power keeps us believing! He works on our behalf so that our faith will not fail. He keeps us on the ship of faith. As previously stated, we may fall down hard on the deck but we will never fall overboard. To say that God keeps a person saved even if that person rejects the gospel and abandons his profession, is a teaching that is not found in the Scriptures.

By grace are we saved through faith! (Eph. 2:8)

By grace are we kept through faith! (1 Pet. 1:5)

Question:

What about 2 Timothy 2:13–“If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself”? What does this verse mean?

Often two assumptions are made about this verse which may or may not be valid: 1) It is often assumed that “if we believe not” refers to a truly saved person who stopped believing and who no longer embraced the truths of the gospel (that is, he became an apostate). 2) It is often assumed that God’s abiding and continuing faithfulness means that this apostate is saved based on His initial profession of faith, even though he later abandoned ship, denied the gospel and cast off his confidence in Christ.

But does the verse really say this? Is it possible that it could refer to a lapse of faith but not a total abandonment of the faith? The best example of this in the Scriptures is that of Peter who went so far as to deny his Lord in a moment of weakness. And yet God was faithful to him and Christ prayed for him that his faith would not fail. God by His grace kept him and restored him to the place where he was able to confess Christ before thousands (Acts 2). Peter's faith faltered for a time but it did not utterly fail. If we were to look at Peter's life as a whole we would consider him to be a Christ-confessor, not a Christ-denier. God remained faithful to Peter throughout this difficult time in his life and eventually brought him to the place of victory. If you were to look at a snapshot of when Peter denied the Lord, you might conclude that he was a total failure. However, if you were to look at a video of Peter's life as a saved man, you would see one who boldly confessed Christ and faithfully served the One he loved. Christ's summary of Peter's life is found in John 17:6—"they [including Peter] have kept My Word."

If the first part of the 2 Timothy 2:13 does indeed refer to a total failure of faith (total apostasy), then how do we know that the second part of the verse means that God in His faithfulness will keep this person saved even though he stopped believing? Could not it also mean that God in His faithfulness will keep His Word to unfaithful Christ-deniers and will deny them before His Father (Matt. 10:33) and before the angels (Luke 12:9)? Or, to say it another way, God in His faithfulness will keep His word to those who reject His Son and do not believe: "If you believe not that I am He ye shall die in your sins" (John 8:24). Hiebert, a dispensationalist, in his commentary on 2 Timothy, supports this understanding.

The best understanding here is that Paul was referring to a believer who has a lapse of faith, rather than one who totally abandons the faith (see Homer Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*). Examples of this would be Peter, Thomas (who disbelieved for a time) and Thomas Cranmer. According to church history, Cranmer denied Christ initially under great pressure, but God was faithful to him and in the end he strongly repudiated his denial. When our faith falters, God is faithful and God will bring us back to Himself. This verse is not speaking of a total apostate. The total apostate and Christ-denier is mentioned in 2 Timothy 2:12—"If we deny Him, He also will deny us" (compare Matt. 10:33; Luke 12:9).

In 1 John 4:2-3 we are told that the person who denies Christ is not saved. The same is said, perhaps even more strongly in 1 John 2:22-23. Free grace teachers insist that a person can abandon the faith and strongly deny Christ, and end up among the redeemed.

Question:

Is it possible for a genuine believer to deny eternal security due to bad teaching?

The one who denies eternal security is saying, "I am saved by grace but I'm going to keep myself saved by my works." Such a person indeed has a faulty understanding of the grace of God. Zane Hodges, while embracing the doctrine of eternal security, also has a faulty understanding of God's grace. I would characterize his view as follows: "I am saved by grace through faith but I am kept by grace apart from faith (whether I continue to believe or not). I'm saved by grace but I continue to be faithful by my works and efforts, and I may or may not be successful in this." Both positions, I believe, reflect a misunderstanding of the grace of God. The Arminian says, "I'm saved by grace

but once I'm saved I need to keep myself saved." Hodges says, "I'm saved by grace but once I'm saved I need to keep myself believing." The correct understanding is that God in His grace not only saves us, but He, by His power and intercessory work, keeps us faithful (1 Pet. 1:5; Luke 22:32).

If a person denies eternal security, is it possible that he is saved? If this person truly recognizes his sinful condition before God and is trusting the Person and work of Christ for his salvation, then yes, he can be saved. But this believer, who has a doctrinal problem in the area of security, is not worthy to be compared with the total apostate who has abandoned Christ and rejected His Person and work. The former does not understand the grace of God as he should; the latter has totally rejected the grace of God and the God of grace. There is a big difference.

Question:

What is the "sin unto death"?

The "sin unto death" is often understood as follows: This sin involves God's severe chastisement of the believer which results in physical death. Perhaps we could think of it as "maximum chastisement." It is as if God were saying, "Your testimony is so terrible and so dishonoring to Me that I cannot afford to have you on earth any longer." It involves taking a believer home to heaven prematurely because of sin.

The reason for such a death is sin, but not the sin of total departure from the faith. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and to men, but they did not abandon faith in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:29 the sin was serious and it involved not discerning the Lord's body, but it did not involve total apostasy and a rejection of Jesus Christ and turning one's back on the foundational truths of Christianity.

The sin unto death also shows how concerned the Lord is with a believer's sanctification. When a believer has a problem with sin, God does something. When a believer is unfruitful, the husbandman does something. The fact that God is active in chastening His children tells us that God will not let His children go on in wickedness. He will only let them go so far, just as a loving human parent would not let his son or daughter continue in sin without proper parental intervention and chastisement. Speaking for myself, as a believer who is prone to wander and prone to leave the God I love, I am encouraged that I can't go too far astray before I will feel the heavy hand of God's loving chastisement upon my life.

Questions:

Must one "abide" in Christ to be fruitful (John 15)? Are we to assume that all believers "abide"? Can a true believer be unfruitful?

Abiding is essential for bearing fruit. The branch cannot bear fruit except it abide in the vine (John 15:4). There are degrees of fruitfulness among believers: some are a little fruitful, some are more fruitful and some bring forth much fruit. The good ground brought forth fruit, some 30 fold, some 60 fold and some 100 fold, but none zero fold. Charles Ryrie said it this way: "Every Christian will

bear spiritual fruit. Somewhere, sometime, somehow. Otherwise that person is not a believer. Every born-again individual will be fruitful. Not to be fruitful is to be faithless, without faith, and therefore without salvation....Every Christian will bear fruit; otherwise he or she is not a true believer” (*So Great Salvation*, pages 45-46). Again he says, “Some think that those who teach that Christians can be carnal also must logically conclude that some believers can go through life without ever bearing fruit of any kind. In other words, they think that the teaching about carnality includes the ideas that carnality can be lifelong and so total that carnal believers will never bear any fruit and yet be genuinely saved. But that is not true, for all believers will bear fruit, some thirty-, some sixty-, and some one-hundredfold (Matthew 13:8). Otherwise they do not possess the new life” (*So Great Salvation*, page 59).

“Abiding in Christ” must be looked at in two ways: positionally and experientially.¹⁰ Positionally all believers abide in Christ as the following passages indicate: 1 John 3:6 (compared with verse 9) and 1 John 4:13. Every believer is “in Christ” permanently. We abide in this position and continue in it. Experientially we abide in Him only as we are rightly connected to Jesus Christ our Vine and enjoying blessed fellowship with Him (John 15:1-5).

It is not unreasonable to look for fruit. Suppose a tree makes a profession and says to me, “I want you to know that I am an apple tree!” I would then have every right to say, “Well, if you are really an apple tree, show me some apples!” Likewise if a person claims to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in his heart, we would have every right to challenge that: “If the Holy Spirit is really in you, where is His fruit (Gal. 5:22-23)?” It is true that carnality will hinder the Spirit of God from doing His wonderful work, but somewhere there ought to be some evidence of the Spirit’s working—some love, some joy, some peace, etc. If there is nothing but total barrenness, something is very wrong.

The early dispensationalists seemed to be unanimous in their insistence that the reality of a person’s faith must be demonstrated by fruit or by works:

Will a believer be saved, no matter into what course of sin he may fall, and die in? A true believer will, infallibly, be saved; but we consider that salvation includes, not only full deliverance from the future consequences of sin, but from the present power and practice thereof. And, hence, if we find a person living in sin, and yet talking about his assurance of salvation, we look upon him as an antinomian, and not a saved person at all....The believer may fall, but he will be lifted up; he may be overtaken, but he will be restored; he may wander, but he will be brought back, because Christ is able to save to the uttermost, and not one of His little ones shall perish....To talk of having the Spirit and yet ‘indulge’ in evil and unholy thoughts is, in our judgment, the ancient Nicolaitanism (Rev. 2:6,15), or modern antinomianism....we believe that the man who draws a plea from the freedom, sovereignty, and eternal stability of the grace of God to continue in sin, knows nothing of Christianity at all, has neither part nor lot in the matter, but is in a truly awful and dangerous condition....The Christian has to struggle with sin; but struggling with it and wallowing in it are two totally different ideas....We must have life before we can do anything; and we get life, not by ‘saying’ we have faith, but by really having it; and when we have it, we shall manifest the precious fruits thereof, to the glory of God. —C.H.Mackintosh, *The*

¹⁰See Appendix 2 where this distinction is carefully explained.

Mackintosh Treasury, “Final Perseverance—What Is It?” (pages 644 and following in the one volume edition).

While we are justified in the sight of God by faith alone, a real faith must be evidenced by works.... There must be LIFE-WORKS, or else there is no life.... When people are saved, ought they not to live as such? Ought not the new life to come out in fruits? It must come out if it be in; and if it does not come out, it is not there.... It is very interesting and instructive to compare the teaching of Paul and James—two divinely inspired apostles—on the subject of “works.” Paul utterly repudiates law-works. James jealously insists upon life-works. If this fact be seized, all difficulty vanishes; and the divine harmony is clearly seen. —C.H.Mackintosh, *The Mackintosh Treasury*, “Life-Works” (pp. 660-662 in the one volume edition).

Shallow preaching that does not grapple with the terrible fact of man’s sinfulness and guilt, calling on “all men everywhere to repent,” results in shallow conversions; and so we have myriads of glib-tongued professors today who give no evidence of regeneration whatever. Prating of salvation by grace, they manifest no grace in their lives. Loudly declaring they are justified by faith alone, they fail to remember that “faith without works is dead”; and that justification by works before men is not to be ignored as though it were in contradiction to justification by faith before God. —H.A.Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, p. 11.

Salvation and a holy walk are inseparably connected... Where there is true salvation and eternal life, it is proved by a godly walk... But he [the apostle Paul] knew, as every Christian should know, that the grace which had saved him, which taught him to live soberly, righteously and godly, would also keep him and enable him to persevere through all hindrances. —Arno C. Gaebelin, *Gaebelin’s Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 938.

Several of these Scriptures [Scriptures which seem to indicate that a person can lose his salvation] bear on the important fact that Christian profession is justified by its fruits. Salvation which is of God will, under normal conditions, prove itself to be such by its own fruits (1 John 3:10; John 8:31; 15:6; 2 Pet. 1:10; James 2:14-26; 1 Cor. 15:1-2; Heb. 3:6,14). —Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, p.188 (his chapter on “Security”).

When a believer is unfruitful, God actively seeks to restore such an one into the place of fruitfulness. The husbandman (vinedresser) is active (John 15:1-2). We also have the wonderful convicting work of God the Holy Spirit. He is grieved when we are unfruitful and He makes His grieved presence felt. If the believer fails to respond to this convicting ministry, then the Father’s chastisement becomes necessary.

Christ describes His true sheep as those who hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27). It’s true that some sheep follow more closely than others, but they all follow. Some are much more fruitful than others, but they are all fruitful. Some believers abound in good works and others not so much. But there’s a difference between not much and not any. A total apostate does not follow Christ at all. Indeed, a total apostate would not even claim to be a saved person! The Bible makes it very clear that if a person does not abide or continue in the doctrine of Christ, he does not have God (he is unsaved).

If a person abides and continues in the doctrine of Christ, he has both the Father and the Son (he is saved). See 2 John 9. Thus one of the marks of a truly saved person is that he will continue in the doctrine of Christ. A total apostate has denied and repudiated the doctrine of Christ, and such a person "hath not God."

Question:

If genuine faith endures to the end, then how can one have absolute assurance that he will be saved five years from now since his faith might fail, proving he was never saved?

The best way to answer this is to give you my own testimony which is as follows:

Based on God's unfailing Word and based on Christ's perfect, finished cross-work on my behalf, I joyfully claim full assurance of my salvation. I have received the Lord Jesus as my Saviour, and having the Son, I know I have LIFE (1 John 5:12). I have His promise that I will never perish (John 3:16; 10:28). I am safe in His hands forever (John 10:28-30). It is His will that I should never be lost but that I should have everlasting life (John 6:36-40). Based on God's Word and God's promises, I can be sure that I will not fall from the faith tomorrow. I believe that I am constantly (present tense) being kept by the power of God through faith (1 Pet. 1:5) and that He will keep me from falling and present me faultless (Jude 24). I am fully persuaded and convinced that the God who began a good work in me will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

Though I know that I am very prone to wander and leave the God I love, yet I know that Christ is interceding for me and praying that my faith will not fail (Luke 22:32) and I believe this prayer will be answered. By God's grace, I am not of those who fall back into perdition, but I am of those who believe to the saving of my soul (Heb. 10:39). As God's child, if I begin to depart from Him, I can count on My Heavenly Father to deal with me as needed, knowing that I will be chastened of the Lord and not condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). On my deathbed, if God should be pleased to give me any kind of mental ability or sanity, I confidently expect to say at that time, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

This kind of confidence is far more reassuring than the lack of assurance that Zane Hodges, Joseph Dillow and their disciples have, as characterized as follows:

I know I'm saved and that I have eternal security but I have absolutely no assurance as to whether I will still be believing in Christ one month or one year or 30 years from now. I may be totally denying Christ by then. I may be a Buddhist by then, married to a Japanese idolater and worshiping false idols myself. I may deny that I'm even saved. I may be teaching against Christianity as a professor in a university. I may blaspheme the very Name of Christ. I may be instructing others not to put their faith in Christ and not to believe the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

I have no assurance whatsoever that I'll be believing in Christ next month or next year. I know God has saved me but I don't know if I will keep myself believing. I know God will keep me saved but I'm not sure if I will keep myself believing. If Christ is praying for me that my faith will not fail, then I have no assurance that this prayer will be answered. I have no assurance that God will keep me from falling. My life may end up being a total reproach to the Name and cause of Christ and my testimony for Christ may do more harm for Christ than if I had never been saved. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! However, the day may come when I will deny Him and blaspheme His Name and totally abandon the truth of the gospel because I may end up believing and behaving as a total apostate.

This kind of assurance of salvation is not an encouragement to my heart, but more importantly is not supported by Scripture.

A new believer can claim full assurance of salvation based on the Word of God, the promises of God and the Person and work of Christ. If a person is really saved, then this person has LIFE (1 John 5:12). If the person really has LIFE then this life will be manifested in some way, form or fashion. The Spirit of God lives in this person and the Spirit of God will do His work. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). If the person is really saved, then the Spirit of God is always leading him. If He is not controlling him (Eph. 5:18), then He is at least convicting him, but He is always leading. God leads His dear children along the path of sanctification. There will be evidences. There will be fruit. And the truly saved person will continue in the faith and will not abandon Jesus Christ. He will not become a total apostate and reject the fundamental truths of the gospel. "For the righteous falleth seven times, and riseth up again, but the wicked stumble into disaster" (Prov. 24:16).

Objection:

But wait, if there must be fruit and evidences and continuance in the faith, then the person cannot really know if he is saved until the end of his life. Not until on his deathbed he can look back on the evidences and fruitfulness and know that he continued in the faith to the very end.

This sounds logical, but there are some things in Scripture that are true even though they do not always seem logical to our minds.

A good example is found in Acts 27. Paul was told by God that not one crewman on the ship would be lost (v. 22) but that they all would be saved (v. 24). Could Paul have absolute assurance, based on God's Word, that they would all be saved? Indeed, Paul said so himself, "for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me" (v. 25). However, later in the chapter the storm was raging and the men on the ship were about to leave the vessel (v. 30) but Paul issued a very strong warning to those in charge: "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (v. 31). The men heeded this warning and, as it turned out, they were all saved (v. 44) just as God had originally promised.

You will all be saved, not one will be lost.

If you don't stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.

These two statements may not seem to go together logically, but God used the strong warning as a means of keeping the men safe. God did not say, "Since I promised that all of you will be saved, you can do anything you want. You can leave the ship if you want. You can jump in the ocean if you want. No matter what you do, you will still be saved because I promised you this at the beginning." No, God kept them safe, but He did so by keeping them on the ship.

The believer is on the ship of faith, bound for heaven. The sea is very rough and dangerous and the storms are many. We fail and falter and fall down on the deck many times (as did Peter, Thomas, etc.). God issues very strong warnings (in Hebrews and elsewhere) as one of the means He uses to keep us on the ship of faith. God does not say, "Since I saved you and promised that you will be safe and secure forever, it doesn't matter what you do on the ship of faith. You can even abandon the faith and fall overboard; it doesn't matter. I'll save you and keep you even if you deny the very Christ who bought you." This is not how God keeps His own. All blood-bought believers will be delivered safely to heaven, but they will be delivered on the ship of faith. They will not abandon ship.

Two things are true:

1) God promises us that we are safe in Him (John 10:27-30) and that not one true believer will be lost (John 6:37-40). He promises this to us at the beginning of the Christian life and we can claim these security promises and have full assurance of salvation.

2) God gives strong warnings that we need to continue in the faith, and hold fast to the gospel message which we heard, and hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end (Heb. 3:6,14; etc.). If we don't do this we cannot be saved. Since the ship of faith is the only vessel that God has designed to bring people to heaven, this ship cannot be abandoned. Since Jesus Christ is the only Saviour (Acts 4:12), a professing believer cannot abandon Jesus Christ and reject Him and still hope to be saved.

Logically it may be difficult for our minds to put these two together, but to be Biblical, we need to believe both.

Question:

Now I agree that there are professors, who are not possessors. How can we distinguish the two with certainty?

We are not God, who alone is perfect knows them that are His (2 Tim. 2:19). Thankfully, some people walk so closely with the Saviour that their lives constantly display His saving grace in hundreds of ways. There is little doubt that these people truly know Christ. They have made their calling and election sure and evident to others. On the other hand, there are those who show little evidence of a changed and changing life and often it is difficult discerning whether or not they are truly saved. We have to put a big **question mark** in our minds. God knows whether they are saved, but we do not.

Another problem is that the flesh can mimic the fruit of the Spirit. There are counterfeit kinds of love and joy and peace that the flesh can produce, and we are not always keen enough to discern the difference. Thankfully we are not in charge of deciding who really is saved and who is not. Our responsibility is to always seek to exhort people in God's direction: "If you are really trusting in Christ, then you need to let your light shine before men so that they might see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). You not only need to KNOW you are saved, but you also need to SHOW that you are saved! If you were arrested for being a true believer in Christ, what evidence would there be to convict you? Could you bring forth a worn Bible? Could people come forward that have been witnessed to by you, etc.?"

Question:

Is continuing in the faith an evidence of salvation?

It is false teaching to suggest that continuing in the faith is a requirement of going to heaven:

A true believer does not continue in the faith in order to be saved.

A true believer continues in the faith because he is saved.

(And thus it is an evidence, not a requirement)

Paul presents "continuance in the faith" as an evidence of salvation in Colossians 1:23, but certainly not as a requirement.¹¹

Believers continue in the faith for the following reasons: 1) God's keeping power (1 Pet. 1:5); 2) Christ's intercessory work, praying that our faith "will fail not"; 3) God's heavy hand of chastening; 4) God's strong warnings to believers, that are used mightily by the Spirit of God to keep us on track; 5) the convicting ministry of God the Holy Spirit; 6) the fact that God is working in us both to do and to will of His good pleasure; 7) the fact that Christ is both the Author and Finisher of our faith, not just the Author of our faith, etc.

Questions:

While it's true that a saved person is referred to as a "believer," does a believer always trust the Lord? A saved person is also referred to as one who "loves God" (Rom. 8:28), yet do we always love Him?

It is very true that genuine believers do not always trust the Lord as they should. However, there is a difference between a believer who does not trust the Lord as he should (and who falls and fails in many ways) and a person who totally turns his back on Christ and the Bible and Christianity and strongly denies everything he once claimed to believe. If he really believed it in the first place, how

¹¹See also the "if" statements of 1 John 2:19; 2 Peter 2:20; Hebrews 3:6,14 and 1 Corinthians 15:2.

could he deny it later? If I really believe that Christ is the only hope of salvation, how could I later deny His saving grace and say that He's not even the Son of God at all? It's true that saved people do not always love God as they should and fall far short of loving God and keeping His commandments. However, this is different from saying that a saved person will later *hate* Christ and deny His Name and blaspheme Him and reject His Person and work. I don't always love my wife as I should, but that's very different from totally abandoning her and rejecting her.

Objection:

First Corinthians 15:2 does not require perseverance but is directly tied to 1 Corinthians 15:12 ff (especially verse 14) and the logical and doctrinal ramifications of denying a future resurrection of believers.

The verb "keep in memory" (1 Cor. 15:2 KJV) should be translated "hold fast." It is the verb *kateko* which means "hold fast." [Note: it can also mean "hold back, restrain" as in 2 Thess. 2:7]. The meaning of "hold fast" is seen in 1 Thessalonians 5:21--"hold fast that which is good." It often speaks of holding fast to Christ and to the gospel message: "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it [hold fast to it], and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15; this in contrast to the stony ground of verse 13 where the person has a mere temporary faith and when things get rough and tough he falls away). Thus holding fast to the gospel is contrasted with abandoning and renouncing the gospel (apostasy).

The same verb is used in Hebrews 3:6,14: "But Christ as a Son over His own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end." "For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end." If a person does not *hold fast*, then he is not part of Christ's true house. He is merely scaffolding. Scaffolding is a temporary attachment that is not part of the true building; the scaffolding falls away after a time, proving that it was not part of the true building. This has nothing to do with a person losing his salvation. It is merely teaching that a true believer will continue to hold fast to Christ and the gospel.

This principle is also taught in Colossians 1:21-23. These verses show that the evidence that of a person being a true believer is that he continues in the faith; the evidence that a person is not a true believer is that he moves away from the hope of the gospel (that is, he does not *hold fast*).

First Corinthians 15:2 and 15:14 both speak about a faith that is "in vain." However, that is where the similarities end. Actually even the Greek terms for "in vain" are not the same. Verse 14 uses *kenos* meaning empty, in vain, to no purpose. Faith in a dead Saviour is an empty faith. Verse 2 uses the word *eike* meaning "to no purpose, without due consideration, thoughtlessly." People can profess faith in Christ in a very thoughtless way, without really considering the full implications of the gospel and without really embracing Christ in a saving way. They attach themselves to Christ for a while, but it is only a temporary attachment, like scaffolding (Heb. 3:6).

Verse 14 speaks of a hypothetical situation (if Christ is not risen, then our faith is in vain). Verse 2 speaks of an actual situation (Christ is risen indeed, v. 4, a central part of the gospel, and you need

to embrace Him now and forever as God’s only hope and only solution to your sin problem).

Verse 14 speaks of the vanity of believing in a Christ who has not risen. Verse 2 speaks of the safety of continuing to believe in a Christ who is risen.

Verse 14 speaks of holding fast to a myth (believing in a Christ who is dead). Verse 2 speaks of holding fast to the truth (the gospel message).

A Comparison and Contrast Between 1 Corinthians 15:2 and 15:14	
1 Corinthians 15:2	1 Corinthians 15:14
Describing an actual situation: Christ is risen indeed, and this fact is a central part of the gospel. You need to embrace the risen Christ now and forever as God’s only hope and only solution to your sin problem.	Describing a hypothetical situation: If Christ is not risen, then our faith is in vain. What value is our faith if it is placed in a dead Saviour?
This verse speaks of the safety of continuing to believe in a Christ who is risen.	This verse speaks of the vanity of believing in a Christ who has not risen.
This verse speaks of holding fast to the truth (the gospel message of a crucified and risen Saviour).	This verse speaks of holding fast to a myth (believing in a Christ who is dead).

There is no hope of salvation apart from the gospel message. A true believer embraces that gospel message and holds fast to it. He may be the most carnal believer who has ever lived in this church age and he may have collected the most wood, hay and stubble of any believer in this age of grace. Yet, he is not going to deny that he believes in Jesus Christ who died for his sins and rose again. He will not deny the Lord who bought him.

Answering a Free Grace Objection:
 Regarding 1 Peter 1:5, faith is what brings the believer into an eternal inheritance and God’s eternal security (1 Pet. 1:4-5), but our faith does not keep us secure—His power does!

Yes, it is God’s power that keeps us secure, not our faith. We are saved “through faith” (Eph. 2:8) but it is not faith that saves us. Christ saves us by His power. We are kept “through faith” (1 Peter 1:5--same Greek expression) but it is not faith that keeps us. Christ keeps us by His power.

The difference in our understanding of 1 Peter 1:5 has nothing to do with whether it is faith that keeps us or whether it is God’s power that keeps us. That we are kept by God’s power we would both agree. We differ in our understanding of *how* God keeps us. Does God keep us faithful by His power or does God keep us whether we are faithful or not? “Faithful” is used here in the sense of

having faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour; unfaithful in the sense of abandoning this faith and rejecting the truths of the gospel. "Faithful," used in this context, means that the person's faith will not fail (Luke 22:32), though it may lapse. First Peter 1:5 says that we are constantly being kept (present tense) through faith unto salvation (final salvation). Free grace men teach that we are constantly being kept apart from faith (whether we continue to believe or not).

Faith in Christ indeed brings the believer into an eternal inheritance and God's eternal security, but 1 Peter 1:5 is speaking about more than just initial faith. The context indicates this. In verse 7 it is speaking of faith in the midst of trials. This is the faith that grabs hold of Christ when things get very rough and tough. It is the exact opposite of the stony ground hearer who, when things get rough and tough, stops believing and abandons Christ. Verse 8 also speaks of "believing" in our Saviour whom we do not see. This is not a reference to initial saving faith, but to our faith in Christ which is our daily privilege to exercise, "seeing Him who is invisible." Also the present tense of the verb "kept" in verse 5 indicates that this faith is something that is ongoing: "We are constantly being kept through faith." Not only is the "keeping" constant and ongoing, but also the faith.

The same construction is used in 1 Peter 1:5 that is used in Eph. 2:8. We are saved by grace through faith. We are kept by God's power through faith.

We are saved by grace through faith. Can a person be saved apart from faith? Can a person be saved whether he believes or not? Is it our faith that saves us? No, Christ saves us by His grace and saving power.

Likewise, we are kept by God's power through faith. Can a person be kept apart from faith? Can a person be kept whether he believes or not? Is it our faith that keep us? No, Christ keeps us by His grace and keeping power.

Faith is the channel through which we are saved. We can't be saved unless we are in that channel. Faith is the channel through which we are kept. We cannot be kept unless we are in that channel. In Acts 27, the ship was the channel through which the crewmen were kept safe. God kept the crewmen safe, but how did He do that? He kept them safe by keeping them on the ship!

Though Peter failed and had a serious lapse of faith, yet Christ kept Him by His power (John 17:12). How did He keep him? Did He say, "I'm going to keep Peter even if he totally departs from the faith and abandons Me"? Or did He say, "Peter you will deny Me thrice, but I'm going to pray for you that your faith will not fail"? It was Peter who later wrote that we are constantly being kept through faith. By His power and intercessory work, God kept Peter in the channel of faith. He kept him on the ship of faith. Peter fell down hard on the deck, but he did not fall overboard.

The doctrine of free grace men is characterized as follows: "God keeps me saved and secure, but it's up to me to keep myself faithful. God's power can keep me saved but God's power may or may not keep me faithful." But if we are faithful at all, is not God the One to be thanked (compare Philemon 4-5)? Has He not kept us faithful by His grace? Are we not very prone to wander and leave the God we love? Does He not take and seal our hearts for Himself? There are different levels of faithfulness among believers and when believers are unfaithful, we are totally to blame and not God. But when we are faithful, do we not have God to thank? The hymnwriter said it this way: "Keep us Lord, O keep us cleaving to Thyself and still believing; till the hour of our receiving promised joys with Thee" (*Praise the Saviour, Ye Who Know Him*).

Question:

In light of departing from the faith, how should we understand 2 Peter 2:20-22, and the proverb of the dog and the sow?

Some free grace men use this passage as an example of true believers who totally depart from the faith (from the way of righteousness) and who turn back to the muck and mire of the world.

The key to the passage is to determine what the beginning state was, the middle state and the latter state. Let us first consider the interpretation which says that this is a true believer (saved person) who goes back to the world and loses his salvation (the Arminian view):

ARMINIAN VIEW		
The Person Returns to the World and Loses His Salvation.		
BEGINNING STATE The person is lost—in the world and of the world.	MIDDLE STATE The person gets saved—in the world but no longer of the world.	LATTER STATE The person returns to the world and loses his salvation—in the world and of the world.
At the beginning he is lost and at the end he is lost. If his latter state is worse than his first state it is because of some of the things mentioned under the “Professing Salvation View” below.		

PROFESSING SALVATION VIEW

The Professing Believer Abandons the Faith and Returns to the World.

<p>BEGINNING STATE</p> <p>The person is lost—in the world and of the world.</p>	<p>MIDDLE STATE</p> <p>The person comes under the strong influence of the gospel and professes faith in Christ and for a time even reforms his life.</p>	<p>LATTER STATE</p> <p>The person abandons his profession, rejects the Christian light he had been exposed to and returns to the world.</p>
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In this case it is very true that the latter state is worse than the first because of the following principle of judgment: “To whom much is given much is required.” “They shall receive the greater judgment” etc. The inhabitants of Capernaum will be judged far more severely than the inhabitants of Sodom because they had, and rejected, greater light (Matt. 11:23-24). The inhabitants of Chorazin and Bethsaida will be judged far more severely than the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon because they had, and rejected, greater light (Matthew 11:20-22). It would be better for an unsaved person never to hear the gospel, than having heard it to reject it. Far better is the heathen in the jungle who has never heard of Christ than the unsaved person who has many times attended church and heard the gospel. Both states (the beginning and the end) involve being unsaved, but the latter state is far less “tolerable” (Matthew 11:24). It would have been better for Judas if he had never been born. Notice the similarity of the language of 2 Peter 2:20b with the language of Matthew 12:45, which is teaching the same thing. Scofield calls it “the worthlessness of self-reformation.”

THE APOSTATE BELIEVER VIEW

The Truly Saved Person Foolishly Returns to the World and Loses His Reward.

<p>BEGINNING STATE</p> <p>The person is lost—in the world and of the world.</p>	<p>MIDDLE STATE</p> <p>The person is saved—in the world but no longer of the world.</p>	<p>LATTER STATE</p> <p>The person gets out of fellowship and turns from God’s commandment to be holy (1 Pet. 1:15) and returns to the world.</p>
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We assume that the worldly, carnal, backslidden, apostate believer is saved and will spend eternity with Christ in heaven. Based on this assumption, how could we ever say that the latter state is worse than the beginning state? How could being a worldly saved person be worse than being a worldly unsaved person? How could having hell as one’s destiny be better than having heaven as one’s destiny? How could eternal death be better than eternal life? How could the lake of fire be better than the bliss of paradise? How can damnation be better than salvation?

Peter's main point is simply that there was no change of nature. The dog is not going to detest and abhor eating his own vomit because it is the nature of a dog to do this. He even enjoys doing it. The pig is not going to detest and abhor going back to the mud because it is the nature of a pig to do this. Pigs enjoy wallowing in the mud. A true believer, who has a new nature that detests and abhors the world and the things of the world, will not enjoy going back to the world. A mere professor, who has no new nature, may reform his life for a time, but he can easily go back to the realm in which he is most comfortable.

Question:

Does the Bible indicate that there are "signs of life" or "evidences" that indicate that a person is saved?

Free grace teachers insist that some Christians manifest no fruit at all in their lives. They believe that a true believer can have a dead faith (James 2:14-26). In their view, in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13), the stony ground (the unfruitful apostate) and the thorny ground (the unfruitful worldly person) both represent saved people. This is the position of Zane Hodges and Joseph Dillow and many others.

Free grace men teach that assurance of salvation cannot be based on one's life (how a person behaves) but must only be based on the work of Christ and the salvation promises of God. If it were based on one's life, then they claim that a person could never know that he is saved. They teach that a person can **know** that he is saved but it is not necessary for the person to **show** that he is saved. What then do they do with the passages in 1 John which show a relationship between assurance and such evidences as obedience, love for the brethren and living a righteous life? Here are some examples:

By this we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments (2:3).

We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren (3:14).

Ye know that everyone that doeth righteousness is born of God (2:29).

He that loveth not knoweth not God (3:8), etc.

Obviously there are signs of physical life. If there is a heartbeat, a pulse, movement, etc. we can safely assume a person is alive. If we are really alive in Christ (1 John 5:12) then there ought to be signs of life manifested at least to some degree. True, in some believers these signs are very faint and dim. There is a great difference between a hundredfold and thirtyfold (Matt. 13:23), but the Lord never said, "zerofold."

Two extremes must be avoided. Free grace advocates teach that a person may be justified but not sanctified (that is, show no signs of holy living). On the other extreme Lordship men like MacArthur teach that a saved person is automatically sanctified, and that if God gives saving faith then that faith cannot be defective. Is there not a Biblically balanced view in between these two extremes? Does not God bring along and complete that great work which He began at the point of salvation (Phil.

1:6)? Does not God keep believers from going on in sin by way of conviction (hopefully leading to confession) and chastisement (Hebrews 12:6-11)?

How then do free grace men get around the many verses in 1 John which show a relationship between assurance (“we know we have passed from death unto life”—1 John 3:14—etc.) and love, obedience and righteous living? They do this by asserting that 1 John is all about tests of fellowship and not tests of salvation. For a complete answer to this, see Appendix 2.

Question:

Did the Early Dispensationalists Hold to the Free Grace View?

Lewis Sperry Chafer strongly contradicts many of the free grace teachings. In Chafer’s *Systematic Theology* (the old eight volume edition), Volume 3, pages 296-306 (“The Arminian View of Security”) Chafer teaches that only the “good ground” in Matthew 13 represents the saved person. Under Hebrews 3:6,14 he says “the genuine endures and that which fails is proved to be false.” He cites 1 John 2:19 as an example of people who “do not continue” and thus are not saved. On page 297 he says “A true salvation is proved by its fruits.” He says that James 2:14-26 is the central passage bearing on the general Biblical contention that a true regeneration is demonstrated by its fruits. On page 302 he says, “a true salvation will be demonstrated by continuing in the faith, etc.” For further study, please see Chafer’s book entitled *Salvation*, chapter 10 (on Eternal Security) which contradicts the free grace position repeatedly, such as his statement on page 101, “**Christian Profession is Proven by Its Fruits,**” and he gives numerous Scripture examples which illustrate his point.

The older dispensationalists, from the time of the great Plymouth Brethren men on, have consistently denounced the position of Hodges/Dillow, as I have documented in my booklet, *The Theology of Zane Hodges and Joseph Dillow and the Grace Evangelical Society*.¹²

What did C. I. Scofield actually teach? In his booklet, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, in the chapter distinguishing true believers from false professors, Scofield cites several passages which he believes refer to mere professors and not true believers. These would include Simon of Acts 8, those who departed in 1 John 2:19, the temporary disciples of John 6:64-66, the man having dead faith in James 2, Hebrews 6:4-6, the man who draws back in Heb. 10:38, etc. Those free grace men who hold the view that a true believer can fall into complete apostasy would disagree with Scofield’s interpretation of many of these passages. Those Scofield has labeled as mere professors they would often see as true possessors.

In the Scofield Correspondence Course, Scofield sometimes comments on a passage in a fuller way than what is found in the notes of his study Bible. Here are a couple of his comments that relate to our discussion:

Scofield’s comment under 1 John 2:15-17: “Remember always that John speaks in an absolute way, presenting the perfected standard. A heart full of the love of the world is an unconverted heart. A

¹²See <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/doctrine/hodges.pdf>

heart full of the love of the Father would be a sinlessly perfected heart. These are the two ultimate extremes. Doubtless the love of the world fills many human hearts, and the Father is not there at all. On the other hand, the believer may have to mourn and confess some inclination still toward the world; but he knows that, if the test came, he would give up a million worlds rather than leave the Father.”

Under 1 John 2:19 Scofield teaches that those “who went out from us” were apostates and not true Christians (contrary to what Zane Hodges teaches).

Under 1 John 3:7 Scofield comments: “ ‘Doeth’ in 2:29 and 3:7 should be ‘practiceth.’ The trend of the life is in view. The new man, God’s seed, cannot sin. Therefore, although we still ‘have... sin’ (1:8), the life should be righteous. If it is not, we must not expect others to believe our profession. This is James’s point of view. Neither should we believe the profession of one whose habitual life is unrighteous.”¹³

Under 1 John 3:14 Scofield says, “This is our subjective basis of assurance.” The term “assurance,” as it is commonly used by believers, has to do with how we know that we are saved, not how we know we are in fellowship. Thus Scofield must have understood 1 John 3:14 to be a test of salvation rather than a test of fellowship.

H. A. Ironside was a leading dispensationalist of the previous century. What did he teach regarding the relationship of evidences to assurance of salvation? The following is taken from his book, *Full Assurance*.

ASSURANCE OF HEART by H. A. Ironside

There is a very precious line of truth unfolded in John’s first epistle that has to do with the experimental [experiential] side of Christianity. In 3:18-19, we are both exhorted and encouraged in the following words: “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.”

Now this assurance of heart is the result of the Spirit’s work in the believer, following the full assurance of faith. The moment I take God at His Word and trust the Lord Jesus as my Saviour, I have eternal life, and I know it on the authority of the Holy Scriptures, which over and over link the present possession of this life with faith in the One whom God gave to be the propitiation for our sins. And as I go on in the Christian life I have abundant **corroborative evidence** through the Holy Spirit’s continuous work in my inmost being that this is indeed far more than a doctrine which I have accepted. I find from day to day positive proofs that I am in very truth a new man, “created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk

¹³Those who allow for “saved apostates” would be much more likely to believe the profession of one whose habitual life is unrighteous because they must always allow for the possibility that he is one of the “saved” who has fallen away from Christ and abandoned the faith. And of course there is always the danger of giving false assurance to a person who is dead in sin.

in them.” Thus my assurance deepens. While at the beginning I rested everything for eternity upon the naked Word of God, I find, as I continue in faith, overwhelming confirmation of the truth of that Word in the manifestations of eternal life actually imparted to me a sinner, through grace.

Let us look carefully at some of these **corroborative proofs** which assure our hearts before Him.

First, the believer becomes conscious of an inborn love for the will of God. “Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; hereby know we that we are in him” (I John 2:3-5). It is not natural for the unbeliever to delight in the will of God. The unsaved man loves his own way and resents being asked to yield his will to another.

[Ironsides then discusses other passages in 1 John, such as “whosoever is born of God does not commit sin” and “we know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.”]

The above is taken from *Full Assurance* by H. A. Ironsides (Moody Press), 1937, pages 78-79.

Answering a Free Grace Objection:

I frankly don't understand how you can say “since all believers are exercised by God's chastening hand...”? While I believe that God chastens every genuine believer, not all respond or are “exercised thereby.” Otherwise, why then the “sin unto death”? Also, explain 1 Corinthians 11:30 to me.

It may be correct to say that only those who respond to God's chastisement in the right way are those who are exercised by it (see Newell and H. Kent on Hebrews, who both seem to take this position). I understood it differently because the verb “exercised” is in the passive voice. It is not something that the believers do but it is something that is done unto them. God exercises them through chastisement. It is also in the perfect tense indicating that this exercise has permanent results. However, it's possible to say that those exercised thereby are those who respond in the right way to God's chastening hand.

The main point is that God does chasten His children with the goal being their holiness (v. 10) and righteousness (v. 11). If a sinning saint does not respond rightly to God's chastisement and continues in his wayward direction, what does God do? Does He not continue to deal with His sinning child? I remember when my oldest son was very young, he refused to obey me, so I chastened him. The corrective action did not produce the desired result because after I had disciplined him and talked to him, he still refused to obey. I determined that he was not going to win over his Dad, so I chastened him yet again. It still did not produce the intended result. I think it took about five chastenings and finally he submitted and I never again faced that kind of defiance. If I, being an evil father, continued the chastisement until it produced the desired result, how much more the Heavenly

Father. I agree that the sinning saint can persist in going in the wrong direction, and this is where the sin unto death comes in to play. God's chastisement continues, even to the point of removing the sinning saint from the earth, if need be. The doctrine of God's chastisement is one of the major reasons why the true believer will not continue in sin and will not totally abandon Christ by embracing wickedness.

There are at least three factors responsible for the believer not continuing in sin and they all start with the letter "C." 1) The Conviction of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). He makes His grieved presence felt. 2) Confession of Sin (1 John 1:9). 3) The Chastisement of the Father (Heb. 12). If I, having been **convicted** by God, refuse to deal with the sin by way of **confession**, God will deal with me by way of **chastisement**. Continued and persistent failure to repent could result in the sin unto death, which might be viewed as God's maximum chastisement.

What Zane Hodges does with this Hebrews 12 passage is shocking. In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, page 810, he says:

In speaking of those who are not disciplined and are thus illegitimate children, he was probably thinking of Christians whose disloyalty to the faith resulted in their loss of inheritance (i.e. reward) which is acquired by the many sons and daughters. (In the Roman world, an 'illegitimate child' had no inheritance rights.) What such Christians undergo, the author had shown, is severe judgment. On the other hand, believers who undergo God's 'discipline' are being prepared by this educational process for millennial reward.

I see the following serious problems with this view that true Christians are the "bastards" that the writer of Hebrews is referring to:

1. This view teaches that there is a group of saved people who are not God's sons. How can a truly regenerate person not be one of God's sons (see Galatians 3:26-4:7 and Romans 8:14-17)? See also Ephesians 1:5 and Hebrews 2:10-11.
2. "For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth" (Heb. 12:6; Rev. 3:19; etc.). Does this mean that there are certain saved people that God does not love? Perish the thought!
3. If there were indeed a group of saved people who were living wicked lives, would not they need God's chastening even more than those walking on God's path? Why would God refuse to chasten those who need it the most? If an earthly father would be quick to correct a wayward son, would not the Heavenly Father do so? If we being evil would do these things how much more our Heavenly Father!

Hodges' suggestion that the term "bastards" is an appropriate term to describe saved people who are truly regenerate should be totally rejected. When the writer of Hebrews used the term "bastards" (illegitimate children) he was referring to those who are not part of the true family of God, the unsaved. God only chastens His own, and He chastens *all of His own*.

Conclusion

True believers can fail the Lord in many ways. Peter is an example of a saved man who had a terrible lapse of faith and denied his Lord, but he recovered and later boldly confessed the Lord before thousands. Saved people can be carnal and walk in the flesh, as exemplified by the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:1-4). God's children can fall into serious sins, can act immaturely, can succumb to temptations, can be influenced by the world, can have a faith that is weak ("O ye of little faith"), can be swayed by false teaching, and can fail the Lord in countless ways. The pages of Scripture are filled with examples of this.

But all of these sad possibilities fall far short of the situation where a person totally denies the faith, blasphemes the Saviour, renounces Christ, rejects the gospel of grace, teaches against the fundamentals of the faith, influences others against Christianity and embraces a false religion such as Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism (or some other cult), humanism, atheism, etc. Such a person is a true apostate, and one who has totally departed from the faith he once professed. God will not allow a true believer to go this far, for the following reasons:

1. God not only saves a person by His grace, but He keeps a person by His grace. Free grace men argue that God keeps a person eternally secure whether he continues to believe the gospel or not. The Bible clearly teaches that the believer is kept by the power of God **through faith** (he is not kept apart from faith). God's keeping power is so great that He not only keeps us safe eternally but He also keeps us faithful.
2. The believer's faith will not fail because of our Lord's intercessory ministry. Peter is a prime example of this. Though his faith seriously faltered on one occasion, the Lord prayed for him that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32). If we could look at a video of Peter's Christian life, we would see a man of faith who kept Christ's Word (John 17:6), not a Christ-denying apostate. We can safely assume that Christ intercedes for all believers in a similar manner.
3. A true believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and when the believer sins, the Holy Spirit is grieved (Eph. 4:30) and He makes His grieved presence felt. As a result the believer is convicted of sin. As genuine children of God, we know how miserable and terrible we feel when we are not right with the Lord, even as Lot's righteous soul was vexed in Sodom. If a person can totally abandon the Lord, and not even feel bad about doing so, this is an indication as to whether the Holy Spirit is truly dwelling in his heart.
4. When the believer sins, God has a remedy. First, there is the cleansing and restoration of fellowship that comes by way of confession (1 John 1:9). Second, if the believer fails to repent and confess, the Holy Spirit will convict and the Heavenly Father will chasten His own (Heb. 12:5-11), and this chastisement could even be taken to the maximum extent, which is the sin unto death. Just as a responsible human parent will prevent his wayward child from going too far in the wrong direction, so our Heavenly Father will prevent His sinning child from going too far in the wrong direction, even if He must cause him to die prematurely.

5. The book of 1 John describes the lifestyle of those who are born of God. John describes believers as those who obey God's Word, love the brethren and live a righteous life. John also describes those who depart as being unsaved (1 John 2:19). A total apostate does not fit John's description of a true believer but he does fit John's description of someone who departs (see Appendix 2 where this is developed fully).
6. Free grace men are generally reluctant to question someone's claim that he is a believer as long as he made a profession of faith at some point in his life. If he totally departs from the Lord, then free grace men consider him an example of a true believer who has become an apostate. One of the great dangers of this approach is the possibility of giving false assurance to a person who is not really saved. The Bible makes it very clear that under certain circumstances it is quite proper to question a person's profession of faith. See Appendix 3 for a full discussion of this issue.
7. There are certain passages which free grace men interpret in unusual ways in order to make these passages support their claim that a true believer can totally depart from the faith. These would include the following: 1) The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13, Luke 8, etc.). To support the free grace view that believers can depart from the faith and be totally worldly, they teach that three of the soils (stony ground, thorny ground, good ground) represent saved people. This runs counter to what the older dispensationalists taught and it runs counter to what Bible believers, in general, have long taught. 2) James 2:14-26. Free grace men teach that a true believer can have a dead faith and be totally devoid of good works. See Appendix 3 to see how traditional dispensationalists have understood this passage. 3) Free grace men fail to recognize that when the Bible states that certain people "believed," this faith does not always reach the level of saving faith. Several examples of when faith does not rise to the level of saving faith have been explained in this paper.

The free grace position as outlined in this paper runs counter to what traditional dispensationalists have long taught. This would include such able Bible teachers as C. H. Mackintosh, John Darby, William Kelly, Arno Gaebelein, C. I. Scofield, Harry Ironside, E. Schuyler English, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Lehman Strauss, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Robert Lightner, Alva McClain, John Whitcomb, William MacDonald, D. Edmond Hiebert, Homer Kent, James Boyer, Lehman Strauss, Warren Wiersbe and many others.

The free grace movement seems to have developed from the early partial rapture teachers, who tended to place all believers into two distinct groups (overcomers and non-overcomers, those who enter the kingdom and those who are severely punished during the kingdom, etc.). This extreme teaching (still propagated by J. D. Faust¹⁴) was followed by a more moderate version led by men such as Zane Hodges, Joseph Dillow and Robert Wilkin. These men still divide *all believers* into two distinct groups: overcomers and non-overcomers, those who inherit the kingdom and those who do not, those who are partakers with Christ and those who are not, those who are joint-heirs with Christ and those who are not, those who partake in the kingdom banquet and those who are left on the outside in darkness, to suffer weeping and gnashing of teeth, etc. For more information on free grace teaching, see our paper on *The Theology of Zane Hodges, Joseph Dillow and the Grace Evangelical Society*.¹⁵

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May these pages be helpful as we seek to wrestle with these very important issues. May the Lord guide us as we seek to bow before the authority of His written Word. If any reader of this paper has input or suggestions or valid criticisms, such would be welcomed.

Sincerely in Christ,

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¹⁴Faust actually teaches that carnal believers will go to hell during the thousand year kingdom. See <http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/doctrine/faust.htm>.

¹⁵Found on line at <http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/doctrine/hodges.pdf>

Appendix #1

Was Simon the Sorcerer a Saved Man?

Arguments in Favor of Simon Being a Saved Man

The strongest argument in support of Simon being a saved man is found in Acts 8:13 where we are told that “Simon himself believed also; and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip.” This man believed and was baptized. Other Samaritans believed and were baptized (Acts 8:12), and we have no reason to doubt their salvation.

Since faith is the one condition for salvation (Acts 16:30-31), it is assumed that Simon the Sorcerer must have been a saved man.

Arguments Against Simon Being a Saved Man

1) Not all faith is saving faith. There are different kinds of belief.

Here are some examples:

A. Luke 8:13 speaks of a temporary faith, of people who “for a while believe.” The faith that is spoken of here is qualified. It is a “for a while” faith or a temporary faith. There is a difference between genuine saving faith and faith that is spurious and short-lived.

It’s important to realize that the stony-ground hearer was in that condition from the start. When the seed was scattered, it did not first fall on good ground, which at a later time became stony and bad. The ground was stony and bad from the start (Matt. 13:5). It was never good ground. There were never any roots. The rock ledge was there from the beginning. This is contrary to the teaching of some who say that at the beginning everything was fine and that the person truly believed on the Lord Jesus, and that this faith was good and valid. It was not good and valid. Even from the very beginning this faith had no roots. Even from the beginning the conditions were not suitable for a good reception of the Word.

Thus Walvoord says that “the seed on shallow ground pictured superficial reception of the Word” (*Matthew*, page 99). Ryrie pointed out that some believers think that “carnality can be lifelong and so total that carnal believers will never bear any fruit and yet be genuinely saved. But that is not true, for all believers will bear fruit, some thirty-, some sixty-, and some one hundred-fold (Matthew 13:8). Otherwise, they do not possess the new life” (*So Great Salvation*, p. 59).

Arno Gaebelein speaks of the rocky ground: “It is the great class of professing Christians. They are covering over this old, desperately wicked heart with a little earth. They put on the form of godliness, while they know nothing of its power. There is also a great deal of enthusiasm, a springing up of the seed; it looks almost as if there is to be a great result—but alas! There is only the name to live, but death is behind it” (*Matthew*, pages 272-273). Gaebelein thus taught that the “stony ground” hearer represented an unbeliever. F.W. Grant in his *Numerical Bible* takes the same position.

Homer Kent taught the same (see his *Matthew* commentary in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*). Here is what L.S. Chafer said about this parable (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296): “Whatever seeming reality may be attached to the experience of those who are represented by that which fell by the wayside, or by seed that fell in stony places, or by seed that fell among thorns, the determining test is that these did not mature into wheat, as did the seed which fell into good ground.... That Word does move many superficially, but those who are saved by it are likened to wheat.” He describes the other three types of ground (hard, stony and thorny) as “the three failures.” See also William Kelly’s discussion of the Luke 8 passage in *The Gospel of Luke*, pages 125-126.

B) 1 Corinthians 15:2. Some believed, but they did not hold fast to the gospel which Paul preached. Paul describes this type of faith as being “in vain.” They believed in vain. Their belief falls short of saving faith. “The Apostle is not implying that some of the Corinthian believers were lost for want of faith; rather it is that their faith has never been sufficient for salvation” (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296).

C) John 2:23. There were many who “believed in His Name when they saw the miracles which He did.” [Compare Simon’s fascination with the miracles of the apostles in Acts 8:13.] Was this saving faith or did it come short of saving faith? It was a faith based on miracles which they saw. This faith, which was based on miracles, came short of saving faith for two reasons: 1) Even though they believed in Him, He did not believe in them (same verb used)! He did not commit Himself to them (v. 24). He knew what was in them. He could see right past their shallow faith. 2) One of these people who had a faith based on miracles was Nicodemus (3:1-2): “We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” This faith that he had did not measure up to saving faith. The Lord told him he must be born again.

D) John 8:31. Jesus spoke to those Jews who believed on Him. Is this describing saving faith? Perhaps it is, but this passage has always puzzled me. In verse 33 who does the “they” refer to? It must refer to people who heard him say, “The truth shall make you free” because they took up on this and said, “We were never in bondage to any man.” But as you read verses 33-44 it is obvious that these are unsaved Jews who were very antagonistic to Christ (“ye are of your father the devil” etc.). If we say that those in verse 31 were true believers, then how do we explain the following context? Homer Kent sees this same problem: “This raises the question of whether it was true saving faith.... No clear transition can be seen here between different groups of Jews.... Apparently the sense is that these who believed in Jesus had come to a sort of mental acceptance, but not to any personal trust” (*Light in the Darkness*, page 126).

E) James 2:14-26 speaks of a “dead faith” which is fruitless and of demons “who believe and tremble.” James makes the point that a true believer will demonstrate his faith by his works. Charles Ryrie said it this way:

James 2:24 [“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only”] is the reply to the question of James 2:14. Unproductive faith cannot save, because it is not genuine faith. Faith and works are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, and the coupon of faith is not valid if detached from works” (*Ryrie Study Bible*, comment under James 2:24).

In thinking about “dead faith” it is helpful to connect this with the “dead works” mentioned in Hebrews 6:1 and 9:14. “Dead works” are works flowing from the flesh which is stamped with death, by which one seeks to establish himself before God. Such works never had “life.” They were not once alive and then “died.” No, they have always been “dead” (without life or spirit). Likewise the same can be said of “dead faith” (James 2), which is of mere human origin, flowing from the flesh which is stamped with death. Such “faith” never had “life,” or was not once alive and then “died.” Such faith has always been “dead” (without life or spirit). “As the body without the spirit [without life] is dead, so faith without works [without life] is dead” (James 2:26).

Conclusion: When the Scripture says that Simon believed, it is possible that his faith was deficient and did not reach the level of genuine saving faith. The Acts 8 passage clearly points to the fact that Simon was greatly impressed and believed because of the miracles that were performed (much like the “believers” in John 2:23 who, like Nicodemus, believed in the miracles but were not born again). John Rutherford describes the faith of Simon in this way: “It is an indication of the nature of the faith which he possessed in the gospel—wondering amazement at a new phenomenon not yet understood, not repentance or trust in Christ” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IV, page 2796).

2. Simon did not understand salvation or the grace of God.

From the very beginning Simon did not understand salvation and did not understand the grace of God. He thought God’s gift could be purchased with money (Acts 8:18-20). Simon, as a sorcerer, had great power over people (Acts 8:9-10) and he wanted to continue to have such power in the Christian realm. He seemed to be envious of the way God was using the apostles (Acts 8:18-19). He did not demonstrate the broken and contrite spirit of a man who was simply thankful to be a sinner saved by grace. He demonstrated a fear of judgment (Acts 8:24), but no genuine repentance. He was told to repent of his wickedness (Acts 8:22), but there is no indication that he ever did.

3. The words of Peter seem extremely harsh and strong for anyone but a wicked unbeliever (Acts 8:20-23).

“But Peter said unto him, Thy money **perish with thee**, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. **Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter:** for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:20-23, emphasis mine).

“Thy money perish with thee”—this implies that Simon was going to perish. Literal translation: “Thy silver be with thee into perdition.” When does the Bible ever describe a true believer as one who is going to perish? Compare 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15. On the contrary, the Bible clearly teaches that true believers will not perish (John 3:15-16; John 10:28).

“Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter”—Peter had just been talking about God’s gift of salvation, and if Simon had no part in that he must be unsaved. He had no part in the fellowship of the saved.

Peter was given great discernment by the Lord to understand the true heart of Simon (even as Paul was later given discernment to understand the heart of Elymas the sorcerer, Acts 13:6-11). Peter knew that his heart was not right in the sight of God.

Simon was poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity (Acts 8:23). How could such a description fit a saved person? The saved person has been set free and redeemed from all iniquity or lawlessness (Tit. 2:14; Rom. 6:17-18).

4. What can we learn about Simon from church history?

Although the Bible only devotes part of one chapter to this man, the Church Fathers (Justin Martyr, Jerome, Origen, Irenaeus, etc.) had much more to say about him. Their writings described his heretical views and his self promotion. He is known in history as Simon Magus, “magus” being a term which means sorcerer or magician. We are more familiar with the word in its plural form, “magi,” as a description of the wise men. Simon had followers called “Simonians” and they held certain Gnostic errors. Many consider Simon to be one of the chief originators of Gnosticism. Philip Schaff wrote, “The author, or first representative of this baptized heathenism, according to the uniform testimony of Christian antiquity, is Simon Magus, who unquestionably adulterated Christianity with pagan ideas and practices, and gave himself out, in panthesitic style, for an emanation of God” (*History of the Christian Church*, Volume 1, page 566). In the legends about Simon he is seen as being in constant opposition to the Apostle Peter. In other words, he was not known for being a friend of the Church.

Simon and his sin is immortalized in our vocabulary. The word “simony” indicates the crime of buying or selling a spiritual office for a price in money.

5. What have Bible students said about Simon the Sorcerer?

C. I. Scofield, in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, agrees that Simon was a mere professor, not a genuine possessor. In the final chapter of this booklet (“Believers and Professors”) Scofield has this heading: “BELIEVERS ARE SAVED, MERE PROFESSORS ARE LOST.” The first example he gives of a mere “pretender” is that of Simon.

Homer Kent observed, “In all likelihood his belief (8:13) was only superficial and not true saving faith, as the following reasons indicate. (1) His belief seems to have been based upon the miracles which he beheld (vs. 13), and could be mere intellectual assent. Jesus usually discounted that kind of faith (John 2:23-25; 6:26,66). It is true that the same word was used for “believe” of Simon and the rest of the Samaritans, but the context must indicate the content of the belief. (2) Simon is contrasted to the others throughout the account. (3) The particular type of rebuke given to Simon

makes it doubtful that he was saved. “Thy silver be with thee into perdition” (literal translation). “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter.” “Thy heart is not right.” The expression “gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity” was OT terminology descriptive of the most serious offenses (Deut. 29:18,20). (4) Simon exhibited no personal sense of sin, but only a fear of judgment. (5) The consistent testimony of Church tradition associates Simon Magus with heresy. Justin Martyr, who lived about 100 years later in Samaria, said Simon became a Gnostic” (*Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 80).¹⁶

F. F. Bruce: “The nature of his [Simon’s] belief must remain uncertain. No doubt it was sincere as far as it went, but was very superficial and unsatisfactory. Jesus Himself, we are told in John 2:23f., attached little value to the faith that rested on miracles alone” (*The Book of the Acts*, p. 179).

Arno C. Gaebelien wrote of Simon’s total misunderstanding of salvation:

“Thy money perish with thee!” The sorcerer with his wicked heart thought that the Gift of God could be purchased with money. In this the aim was the Gospel itself. Salvation and all that is connected with it, including the Spirit, is the Gift of God, without money and without price; it cannot be earned nor bought. He had no part nor lot in this matter. And this is true of all who in the depravity of their hearts think of obtaining the power of God by what they do. He sees himself uncovered and exposed “in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity” in spite of his outward profession, his baptism and association with Philip. (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 152).

Charles Ryrie’s brief comment in his *Study Bible* under Acts 8:13 is of interest: “*Simon himself believed also*. Peter’s denunciation in verses 20-23 indicates that Simon’s faith was not unto salvation (James 2:14-20).”

Harry Ironside: “We see in Simon a baptized man, a religious professor, who had not been regenerated” (*Acts*, p. 107; see also his earlier discussion on page 106).

John Phillips: “Simon’s faith was spurious from the start. He was not won by Philip’s message but by Philip’s miracles. He ‘believed,’ it says. But *what* did he believe? Whatever it was he believed, it did not regenerate his soul. He was as lost after he ‘believed’ as he was before he ‘believed,’ as the sequel of the story makes clear...What Simon Magus coveted was not the Master but the miracles, not the Savior but the signs” (*Exploring Acts*, page 152-153).

¹⁶Stanley D. Toussaint gives seven reasons why Simon was probably not a true believer [*Bible Knowledge Commentary, NT*, page 373].

William MacDonald: “It seems that Simon had not been born again. He was a professor but not a possessor” (p. 1605). MacDonald continues:

Peter’s answer indicates that Simon was not a truly converted man: 1. **“Your money perish with you.”** No believer will ever *perish* (John 3:16). 2. **“You have neither part nor portion in this matter”**; in other words, he was not in the fellowship. 3. **“Your heart is not right in the sight of God.”** This is a fitting description of an unsaved person. 4. **“You are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”** Could these words be true of a regenerate person? (*Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 1606).

Conclusion

Although the Scripture clearly says that Simon “believed,” everything else that Acts 8 tells us about this man indicates that his faith did not reach the level of saving faith. He believed because of the miracles which he saw, but he did not believe to the saving of his soul.

Appendix 2

Does the Book of 1 John Present Tests of Fellowship or Signs of Life?

The Apostle John writes in a simple but authoritative style in which he describes two groups of people. One group is characterized by obedience, love and a righteous life; the other group is characterized by disobedience, hatred and wicked living. Bible students have differed in how they identify the two groups that John is describing. Some believe that John is making a contrast between those believers who are in fellowship and those believers who are not in fellowship. Others maintain that John is making a sharp contrast between those who have eternal life and those who do not (a contrast between the saved and the unsaved). These two views can be represented as follows:

Tests of Fellowship: A Contrast Between Those Who are in Fellowship and Those Who are Not	
The Person Who is in Fellowship:	The Person Who is Not in Fellowship:
1) Obeys Christ's Commands (2:3)	1) Disobeys Christ's Commands (2:4)
2) Loves the Brethren (3:14)	2) Hates His Brother (3:14b-15)
3) Practices Righteousness (3:7)	3) Does Not Practice Righteousness (3:10)
4) Does Not Commit Sin (3:9)	4) Commits Sin (3:8)

Signs of Life: A Contrast Between Those Who Have Eternal Life and Those Who Do Not	
The Person Who Has Eternal Life:	The Person Who Does Not Have Life:
1) Obeys Christ's Commands (2:3)	1) Disobeys Christ's Commands (2:4)
2) Loves the Brethren (3:14)	2) Hates His Brother (3:14b-15)
3) Practices Righteousness (3:7)	3) Does Not Practice Righteousness (3:10)
4) Does Not Commit Sin (3:9)	4) Commits Sin (3:8)

The Matter of Fellowship

There is no question that one of the themes in the book of 1 John is that of fellowship. Chapter 1 is brief and contains only ten verses, but the term “fellowship” occurs four times. John is writing so that believers might have fellowship and that they might have the joy that comes from such fellowship (1:4). Fellowship with God is broken by sin, and confession of sin is essential for restoration of fellowship (1:8-10). This is the necessary washing of the feet that our Lord so beautifully illustrated with His disciples in John chapter 13. Peter and the other believing disciples had already had their salvation bath and were completely clean, but then needed to have their feet repeatedly cleansed from the daily defilements of life (John 13:8-11).

I would hesitate, however, to make **fellowship** the major theme of the book of 1 John. The term fellowship is used four times in the first chapter but is never used in the rest of the book. The main reason John wrote this book is revealed in 1 John 5:13:

“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; **that ye may know** that ye have eternal life.”

It is interesting to compare this with the stated purpose of why the Gospel of John was written:

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:30-31).

The Gospel of John was written so that men might believe and have eternal life. The book of 1 John was written so that believers might know that they have life. The Gospel was written so that the unsaved might believe and have life; the epistle was written so that believers might know and have assurance. Scofield wrote that 1 John was “written to Christians to give a foundation for assurance” (*Scofield Correspondence Course*, Vol. IV, p. 912).

It is not surprising then that one of the key words in the book of 1 John is the word “**know**.” It occurs 39 times (conveyed by two Greek words: *ginōskō*, 23 times and *oida*, 16 times). “Know” is a word of assurance. “And hereby **we do know** that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3). “**We know** we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren” (1 John 3:14).

So while it is true that “fellowship” is a prominent theme in chapter 1, it is not a dominant theme in the rest of the book. The main theme of the final four chapters seems to be that of assurance, with the Greek words for “know” being dominant.

The Tests of Fellowship Position

Theologically, there is validity to this position. A person who is in fellowship with God (abiding in Christ, filled with the Spirit, walking by means of the Spirit, etc.) is going to be obedient to Christ's commands and will love the brethren and will live a righteous life.

A believer who is not enjoying fellowship with God (not abiding in Christ, but rather quenching and grieving the Spirit) is going to be walking in the flesh. A believer walking in the flesh will certainly be disobedient, unloving and walking in sin. "Are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3:3) This last quotation shows that a fleshly believer can walk just like an unsaved man. What a terrible testimony this person is, bringing shame to the Name of Christ. Lordship salvation men fail to recognize these sad realities and possibilities, but there are ample examples of "Lordship failures" in Scripture. In other words, there are many examples in the Scriptures of saved individuals who failed to obey and submit to the Lord at certain points in their lives. We could think of Lot, Aaron, Samson, Solomon, Asa and others. We could also look at our own walk with the Lord and find times when we failed to surrender fully to the Lordship of Christ.

If a professing believer is being tested with respect to communion with God, then present acts of disobedience, lack of love and committing sin would certainly indicate that this person is not having fellowship with God. However, we do not want to be blind to another possibility, namely that the person may not have eternal life and may have never entered into a saving relationship with Christ. Not everyone who claims to know God is truly born again.

The issue of this paper is not to show that the fellowship position is invalid when testing a believer's conduct, but to ask whether this is really what the Apostle John is talking about. Does he use language which contrasts a believer who has fellowship with a believer who does not, or does he use language which contrasts one who has eternal life with one who does not? Is John talking about fellowship or is he talking about salvation? Are the terms he uses descriptive of fellowship (or the lack thereof) or of salvation (or the lack thereof)?

On the chart found on the next page, we have a side-by-side comparison of the descriptions John uses to differentiate these two groups. As you look at this chart, ask yourself, is John making a contrast between a believer who is having fellowship with God and a believer who is not, or is John making a contrast between a saved person who belongs to God and an unsaved person who does not? The language John uses should be the key in deciding this issue.

Two Groups of People Contrasted	
Keeping Christ's Commands	
This person knows God (2:3). He dwells in God and God dwells in Him (3:24).	This person claims to know God but is a liar (2:4).
Practicing Righteousness and Not Committing Sin	
He abides in Him (3:6).	He has not seen Him, neither known Him (3:6).
He is righteous (3:7) and born of God (3:9; 5:18).	He is of the devil (3:8).
He is a child of God (3:10).	He is a child of the devil (3:10). He is not of God (3:10). He is like Cain who was of that wicked one (3:12).
Loving the Brethren	
He abides in the light (2:10).	He is in darkness (2:9) and is blind (2:11).
He has passed from death unto life (3:14).	He abides in death (3:14) and does not have eternal life abiding in him (3:15). He is a murderer (3:15).
He is born of God and knows God (4:7).	He does not know God (4:8).

If someone described for you a person who did not know God, who is not of God (does not belong to God), who is a child of the devil like Cain, and who does not have eternal life abiding in him, would you conclude that he was describing a believer who is not enjoying fellowship or an unsaved person? The language used by John so obviously describes an unsaved person that it is hardly worth debating.

Looking at the chart as a whole, it seems to be a strong contrast between a person who is born of God and a person who is not, a person who has passed from death unto life and a person who has not, a person who is a child of God and a person who is a child of the devil, a person who knows God and a person who does not.

There is only one phrase on the left side of the chart which could be a term used of fellowship, and that is the expression “whosoever abideth in Him” (3:6). Abiding in Christ, as it is used in John 15, is certainly an expression which speaks of fellowship, being in a right relationship with Christ and being rightly connected to Him who is our Vine and our Life. We will discuss this important phrase later in this paper.

The language John uses seems to be contrasting two types of people, saved and unsaved, those who have life and those who do not. Since those holding to the fellowship position dispute this, let us examine these passages more closely.

Obeying Christ's Commands

The person who obeys Christ's commands knows [ginōskō] God (2:3). The person who does not obey Christ's commands, does not know God. Even though he claims to know God, his claim is false; he is a liar (1 John 2:4; compare Rev. 21:8). He does not really know God at all.

John makes it clear in his Gospel that knowing God and knowing Christ is the very essence of salvation: "And this is life eternal, that they might know [ginōskō] Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent" (John 17:3). The person who knows God is the person who has eternal life; the person who does not know God does not have eternal life. We commonly use this terminology to refer to salvation, as in this example: "We are praying that this person might come to know the Lord." This is normally understood as a prayer for this person's salvation, not a prayer that he would be restored to fellowship.

The Lord Jesus, the good Shepherd, said concerning His sheep: "I am known of mine" (John 10:14). In other words, "My sheep know Me!" Even His wayward, out of fellowship sheep know Him.

Paul reminded the Galatians that before they were saved they "knew not God" but after they were saved they "have known God" (Gal. 4:8-9).

The Scriptures repeatedly describe unsaved people as those who do not know God:

"The world knew Him not" (John 1:10).

[To the unsaved Pharisees] "Ye neither know Me, nor My Father" (John 8:19).

"The world hath not known Thee (the Father)" (John 17:25).

"The world...knew not God" (1 Cor. 1:21).

"The world...knew Him not" (1 John 3:1).

"They profess that they know God [they claim to be saved], but in works they deny Him" (Tit. 1:16).

"Even as the Gentiles who know not God" (1 Thess. 4:5)

"In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who shall be punished with everlasting destruction" (1 Thess. 1:8-9)

So when John refers to a person who does not know God, he is referring to an unsaved person, not a believer who is out of fellowship. An additional proof of this is found in 1 John 4:7 where the person who knows God is defined by John as the person who is "born of God." Thus, the person who does not know God has never been born again! Knowing God is not a term used to describe fellowship with God, but it is a term used to describe a person who is saved and regenerate, a new creature in Christ.

It is true that if a believer is in fellowship with Christ, he will grow to know the Lord more and more (2 Pet. 3:18). A carnal believer will have his growth in the knowledge of God stunted, but it would be wrong to describe him as someone who does not know God. Rather, it is the unsaved person who “hath not seen Him, neither known Him” (1 John 3:6).

1 John 3:6 and 4:8 speak of those **who do not know God at all**. They do not know Him and have NEVER known Him. The perfect tense in 1 John 3:6 indicates that the person has not known God in the past and this condition of not knowing God continues into the present. There is no such thing in Scripture as a true believer who at times knows God and at other times does not know God. A person either knows God and is saved or he doesn't know God and is lost (see 2 Thess. 1:8). Whether or not a believer is at any moment enjoying a practical knowledge of God and walking in the light of the blessed Person of God is a separate question.

John teaches us in 1 John 2:3-4 that those who truly know God are those who keep Christ's commandments. Our Lord taught something very similar in John 17:5. Concerning His disciples He said, “I have manifested Thy Name unto the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me, and **they have kept Thy Word.**” At first glance, this seems like a surprising statement because we can think of times when His disciples were not obedient to Him. Take Peter for example. Peter was certainly not obedient to His Lord when he denied Him three times. And yet if you were to look at the lives of the apostles as a whole, you would have to conclude that their lives were characterized by obedience, not disobedience. That is why Jesus, who knew all of their faults and failures, said of them, “They have kept Thy Word” (John 17:6). If you took a snapshot (a still picture) of Peter in his weakest moment, you would conclude that he was a disobedient believer and a Christ-denier. However, if you took a video of Peter's entire saved life, you would conclude that he was an obedient believer who boldly confessed Christ before men. Peter knew God and obeyed Him.

Loving the Brethren

It is hard to understand how anyone can misinterpret 1 John 3:14. The expression “passed from death unto life” is found in the Bible only here in 1 John 3:14 and in one other place, both authored by the Apostle John. The second place where this phrase occurs is in John 5:24: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation [judgment], but is passed from death unto life.” This is one of the clearest salvation verses in the Bible. It has nothing to do with fellowship, except for the obvious fact that no one can ever have fellowship with the living God until they have passed from death unto life. But the verse pertains to salvation and obtaining eternal life, not to fellowship. The moment a person is saved he passes out of death into life! Paul describes this salvation event in these terms: “And you hath He **quickened**, who were **dead** in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

The Lord Jesus told us how a sinner can pass from death unto life, and it is by believing (John 5:24). John tells us how a saint can know that he has passed from death unto life (1 John 3:14). If a person is truly alive, there ought to be signs of life. This is certainly true in the physical realm. If a person is alive physically there are signs or indicators that this is true: a heartbeat and a pulse, movement, breathing, talking, etc. Medically these are called “vital signs.” If a toddler falls down the basement stairs, the parents are relieved to hear crying; to hear nothing at all would not be a good sign. John is simply saying that one of the signs of spiritual life is love for the brethren. If a person does not manifest love for the brethren, this could be an indicator that the person is unsaved. If the

person is saved, at the very least we would have to consider this person very sick spiritually, just like a person in a coma could be alive but show very few signs of physical life.

How can one have life without there being any signs of that life being present? If someone is dead, there are absolutely no signs of actual life present. But if someone is alive, regardless of how bad a shape he is in (e.g., someone in a comatose state), there is always some sign of life of some kind!

Just as there are signs of life, so there are signs of death: "He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:14-15). To not have eternal life abiding in you means that you were never saved; you never passed from death unto life. Once a person has eternal life abiding in Him, he can never lose it. Eternal life is the present and abiding possession of every believer (John 6:47). A believer out of fellowship can lose joy but he cannot lose eternal life (compare Psalm 51:12).

Cain is given as an example of a person who did not love his brother; indeed, he murdered him (1 John 3:10-12). What was Cain's problem? Was he out of fellowship or was he unsaved? John tells us that Cain was a child of the devil (compare 1 John 3:10). "He was of that wicked one" (1 John 3:12). Cain showed forth signs of spiritual death because that was his true state.¹⁷

"I'm saved but I detest Christians. I hate being with them. I hate what they love and I love what they hate." Perish the thought! How could a blood-bought member of the body of Christ think of his brothers and sisters in Christ in such a way?

The person who is not loving the brethren is in darkness; he is not connected to the light (1 John 2:9-11). A true child of God is a child of the light: "For ye were once darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord, walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). A child of God has been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). A child of the light may not always walk worthy of his exalted position and he may even walk in darkness for a time, but a defective walk does not change the fact of his position: "Now are ye light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8).

The person who loves the brethren is born of God (he is a child of God) and he knows God (1 John 4:7). The person who does not love the brethren does not know God and has not been born of God (1 John 4:8). We have already discussed the significance of "knowing God." Here in verse 7 John equates knowing God with being born of God.

What clearer language could John have used to describe a saved person? The one who loves the brethren has passed from death unto life, abides in the light, knows God and is born of God. The one who does not love the brethren abides in death, does not have eternal life abiding in him, is in darkness and does not know God. Such a one is not saved. John could not use language any clearer than this.

¹⁷Wilkin teaches that Cain was a saved man, even though he is described as "of that wicked one" (*Grace in Focus*, "Are Esau and Cain in Heaven or Hell?" Sept/Oct 2007 issue, published by the Grace Evangelical Society). Wilkin's weak argument is as follows: "Surely Adam and Eve, who met with the pre-incarnate Jesus in the garden, would have evangelized both Cain and Abel. If Abel believed, would it not be likely that his brother Cain would as well?" Just because Cain heard the message from his parents does not mean he believed it.

Doing or Practicing Righteousness

John tells us that the person who is practicing righteousness is righteous or justified (1 John 3:7). The term “righteous” must refer to the person’s righteous standing; otherwise the statement would be redundant. It would be like saying, “The person who is practicing righteousness is living a righteous life.” This would be obvious and would not need to be said. John is stating the fact that the one who lives a righteous life is righteous. How righteous is he? “Even as He is righteous” (3:7). He is just as righteous as Christ, a wonderful fact which can only be true of a justified person.

John also declares that every person who practices righteousness is born of God (1 John 2:29). He is not only justified but he is regenerated, a child of God. Notice that John does not say, “Every one who practices righteousness is having fellowship with God.” Again the issue is that of salvation, not fellowship.

The person who does not practice righteousness is “not of God” (3:10). Since the context of verse 10 involves distinguishing between those who are children of God and children of the devil, the expression “not of God” must be equivalent to “a child of the devil.” If he is not of God, then he does not belong to God, has not been born of God and instead belongs to the devil’s spiritual family, as did Cain (3:12). Abel was saved and his works gave evidence of this: “his brother’s [works were] righteous” (3:12). Cain was of the devil and his works gave evidence of this: “because his own works were evil” (3:12).

The trend of the life is in view. The new man, God’s seed, cannot sin. Therefore, although we still “have . . . sin” (1:8), the life should be righteous. If it is not, we must not expect others to believe our profession. This is James’s point of view. Neither should we believe the profession of one whose habitual life is unrighteous [C. I. Scofield, *Correspondence Course*, Vol. IV, p. 928.]

According to John’s black and white world, those who practice righteousness are saved and those who practice evil are lost. We shall talk about John’s style of speaking in black and white language later in this paper.

Committing Sin and Not Sinning

These are the verses which are most problematic because John describes people who do not commit sin (3:9) and who do not sin (5:18) and who cannot sin (3:9).

Lest John should be misunderstood, we need to keep in mind the clear teaching found in 1 John 1:8-10. These verses clearly state that believers have sin (that is, they have a sinful nature—v. 8) and that believers do sin (that is, they commit acts of sin—v. 10) and that believers need to confess their sins (v. 9). So whatever John is teaching in the rest of the book cannot contradict these revealed facts (and cannot contradict what each believer knows to be his own sad experience as he struggles with indwelling sin on a daily basis—Romans 7). Whatever John is teaching, he is not teaching sinless perfection.

John is, however, teaching that there are two groups of people with respect to committing sin. The group which commits sin is unsaved and the group which does not commit sin is saved. For example, the person who sins “hath not seen Him, neither known Him” (3:6) and is “of the devil”

(3:8). These are clear references to the person's unsaved state. The person who does not sin is the person who abides in Him (dwells in Him—3:6). In 1 John 3:8 and 5:18 this person is identified as the person who is “born of God,” a regenerate, saved person. Nothing in these descriptions suggests John is talking about fellowship, except the term “abide” which will be discussed shortly.

Two reasons are given as to why the saved person is not able to sin: 1) “for His seed remaineth in him,” (3:9) which most understand to be a reference to the believer's new nature; 2) “because he is born of God” (3:9). For the person who is not born of God and who is not a partaker of the divine nature, it is impossible to live a life free from the domination of sin. The only option he has is a life of continual and persistent sin. He is a slave to the indwelling sin which finds its source in his corrupt nature.

Abiding in Him—Position or Condition?

There is one phrase which could be reasonably understood as referring to fellowship rather than salvation. It is the phrase “abideth in Him” (3:6). The same Greek word is also found in 1 John 3:24, “dwelleth (abideth) in Him,” and in 1 John 2:10, “abideth in the light.”

It is readily acknowledged that “abiding in Christ,” especially as it is used in John 15 is a phrase which is synonymous with having fellowship with God. The phrase is also used in this way in 1 John 2:28, “Little children, abide in Him....”

While we recognize that the term can be used of fellowship with God, it is also used to describe a saved person. Compare the these two verses:

“Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not” (3:6).

“Whosoever is born of God sinneth not” (5:18).

Based on these two verses, it appears that John is equating “abiding in Him” with being “born of God” (being regenerate, being a child of God, being saved).

How can “abiding in Him” be used as a description of salvation? The answer is that every believer positionally abides and lives and dwells in Christ. We permanently abide in Christ and we dwell in Him. Positionally we are “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:1 and so many other passages). This is where we live and we can never again be outside of Christ, which is where we lived when we were unsaved (Col. 4:5). Our home is in the beloved one, perfectly accepted in Him (Eph. 1:6). We are forever permanently connected to our blessed Lord. This is different from our daily walk with the Lord where we can experientially abide in Christ or we can fail to abide in Him.

There is another phrase which John uses which seems to be speaking of our position in Christ. It is found in 1 John 3:24—“And he that keepeth His commandments **dwelleth in Him and He in him.**” We have already learned from 1 John 2:3-4 that the person who keeps His commandments is the person who knows Christ in a saving way. [To know God is to be born of God—1 John 4:7.] Therefore the phrase, “dwelleth in Him and He [dwelleth] in him” must be a description of a saved person who is born of God. It cannot be a description of a person having fellowship with God. One could argue that “dwelling in Him” or “abiding in Him” is used to describe fellowship in John 15, and this is true. But the last part of the phrase indicates that He (God) dwells in the believer. And the indwelling presence of God in the believer is a reality whether the saved person is enjoying

fellowship or not. We may grieve the Holy Spirit by our sin, but He is not going to leave us (Eph. 4:30). God's indwelling is permanent, and it is true of every believer whether he is in fellowship or not. It is even true of the carnal Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:19). He lives in us and we live in Him (Galatians 5:25).

The phrase "dwelleth in him and he [dwelleth] in God" is used in 4:15 of every believer, not just those believers who are in fellowship. Every saved person confesses that Jesus is the Son of God.

Finally, the Lord Jesus Himself has carefully defined this term. Compare these two verses:

"He who eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life" (John 6:54).

"He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in Me and I in him" (John 6:57).

Thus, the person who has eternal life is the person who dwells in Christ and Christ dwells in Him. This relationship is true of every saved person, including those who may walk in carnality. The Lord Jesus here used the phrase "dwelleth [abides] in Me" in a positional sense, a sense which is true of every one who possesses eternal life.

John's Abstract Style of Writing

John writes in a black and white style, without any shades of greys. As John presents the contrast between a saved person and an unsaved person, he sees one person keeping Christ's commands (white) and another person not keeping Christ's commands (black). There are no greys. We know that believers disobey God at times, but John sees none of this (even as our Lord saw no disobedience in His disciples, though it was obvious they had their failings—John 17:6).

John sees those who have passed from death unto life as loving the brethren (white) and he sees those who do not have eternal life as hating the brethren (black). We know that in our actual experience there are greys and there are believers who can be very unloving. Indeed, Galatians 5:15 speaks of believers biting and devouring one another!

John sees believers living righteously (white) and unbelievers living wickedly (black), as Cain lived. John sees those born of God as not sinning (white) and he teaches that those who sin are of the devil (black). And yet in chapter 1, John balances this out and clearly states that believers can and do sin.

The earlier dispensationalists understood that John's epistles have an abstract character. William Kelly wrote:

John is not here looking at modifications through circumstances, it is to be observed. He is not here looking at particular cases of unfaithfulness. John as a rule does not occupy himself with the details of fact. He looks at truth in its own proper abstract character apart from passing circumstances; and if you do not read John's writings thus, especially the epistle before us, I am afraid that there is little prospect that you will ever understand them.

Roy A. Huebner, an authority on the writings and theology of John Darby, added this:

We are partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). God's seed is in us: Whosoever has been begotten of God does not practice sin, because his seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God (1 John 3:9). The "seed" refers to the new nature from God. It cannot sin; yet here we read that the person cannot sin: "he cannot sin." What is true of the nature is here predicated of the person having that nature. In practice the believer may sin. It is essential that the reader apprehend the abstract nature of John's epistles. . . . Thus, the apostle's expression [in many places] does not address the mixed condition we often find in ourselves. That is the solution to the apparent contradiction.

C. I. Scofield wrote:

It is exceedingly important to note that John habitually deals with the Christian as a child of God in an abstract and absolute way rather than as compassed with infirmity and still bearing about the old nature. He does not ignore the old man, but is not occupied with him. [*Scofield Correspondence Course*, Vol. IV, p. 914).

John presents the believer's conduct as if the believer only has a new nature; the failings of the flesh are not mentioned and are not in view. John's style is not unlike our Lord's style in some places. Consider Matthew 7:18—"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." If the good tree represents the saved person, then the Lord is seeing the person's conduct only in light of his new nature; the failings of the flesh are not in view. The fruit of the Spirit is in view, but we know as a practical matter of fact that a true believer may fail to walk in the Spirit and may manifest the works of the flesh. So both John and the Lord present a side of the truth, and a full understanding comes only as we weigh out all of the Scriptural teaching on the matter.

Bruce Anstey, in his book *The Epistles of John and Jude*, has an excellent section in which he explains the abstract style of John's writings:

The Apostle John writes in a unique way. The key to understanding his statements is to see that he views things abstractly. F. B. Hole defined the word "abstract" as follows: "When we speak abstractly, we purposely eliminate in our minds and utterances all qualifying considerations, in order that we may more clearly set forth the essential nature of the thing of which we speak" (*Epistles*, vol. 3, p. 161). Hence, we might say, "Cork floats." In stating that, we are speaking of what cork does characteristically. We are not taking into consideration that it could be submerged under water if we tied something to it to hold it there. Under normal conditions, cork floats. Similarly, John speaks of things in their essence—that is, as to what they are characterized by without referring to any specific person, thing, or situation. He examines the feature of life eternal by what normally characterizes it, not by what someone with that life does that is uncharacteristic of that life. Due to a poor state, these features may be obscured in us at times, but John does not take that into consideration as he views the features of that life.

J. N. Darby said, "All John's statements are absolute. He never modifies them by bringing in the difficulties or hindrances that we may have in the body. 'He that is

born of God,' he says in chapter 3, 'does not commit sin.' He is speaking there according to the very essence of the nature. The divine nature cannot sin. It is not a question of progress or degree, but he cannot sin because he is born of God....John always states it in its own proper absoluteness, according to the truth itself... We may fail in keeping it, but the Apostle does not give these kinds of modifications, but the truth itself" (*Collected Writings*, vol. 28, p. 214). Thus John speaks of believers optimally or ideally—that is, what they are when they walk in the power of the Spirit and in the enjoyment of life eternal. He does not see them as being anything less than that. He writes with no middle ground in the discussion. It is either light or darkness, life or the absence of life, love or hatred, etc. This must be kept in mind when reading the epistle.¹⁸

Conclusion

The book of 1 John deals with fellowship in chapter 1, but the main theme of the book is that of assurance, the key word being "know." These things were written so that believers might know that they have eternal life (5:13). John, writing in his black and white style, presents a sharp contrast between the conduct of those who have eternal life and the conduct of those who do not. He deals with three significant areas of conduct: 1) obedience to Christ's commands; 2) love for the brethren; 3) practicing righteousness and not sinning.

If a person truly has life, then there ought to be signs of life. If a person is lacking these signs of life and if he is manifesting signs of death, then he needs to do some serious soul searching to determine why he is living like an unsaved person. There are two possibilities: 1) He is unsaved and needs to pass from death unto life; 2) He is a believer but very sick spiritually, manifesting the works of the flesh. In either case, he needs to flee to Christ who alone can heal the sin-sick soul.

¹⁸Bruce Anstey, *The Epistles of John & Jude*, pages 11-12.

Appendix 3

Is It Wrong to Question A Person's Profession of Faith?

A profession of faith is an act of openly declaring or publicly claiming a belief or faith. A Christian profession is when someone claims to have trusted Jesus Christ. Such a person says that he is a Christian and that he has believed in Christ at some point in time. It is a clear Scriptural principle that not everyone who **professes** Christ actually **possesses** Christ. The person who “has the Son” (1 John 5:12) is the person who truly possesses Christ and has eternal life. Just saying that you have believed on Christ does not make it a reality. Receiving Christ by faith (John 1:12) is a spiritual transaction that must take place in the heart.

Once this transaction is made in the heart, and the person has genuinely received Christ as Saviour, he has eternal life and he will never perish (John 10:27-30). Nothing said in this paper is meant to question the Biblical doctrine of eternal security, that a true believer is safe and secure in Christ forever.¹⁹ The issue being dealt with here is that not everyone who claims to be a believer in Christ is a genuine believer.

Today in evangelical, dispensational circles, there are men who call themselves “free grace teachers.” Typically, such teachers never want to question someone’s claim that he is a true believer. Their thinking is along these lines: *Having given a mere profession of faith, a person could then live however he pleases, and no one should question his profession or question the genuineness of his faith.*

One nationally known free grace teacher said it this way:

If someone tells us that they have believed on Christ, we don’t run around holding their salvation hostage. We don’t say, “Well, I don’t see enough fruit in your life to prove that you really received Christ.”

After making this statement, this teacher added, “This is the free grace position.” The implication from this statement is that we are never to question a person’s profession of faith based on how this person lives (his character and conduct, his fruit or lack of fruit). But if the person is not truly saved, which is certainly a possibility, are we really helping this person by allowing him to think that all is well with his soul? Not everyone who claims to be saved is really saved. Not everyone who “names the name of Christ” (2 Timothy 2:19) is really a true Christian! Not everyone who says he is born again is truly born again! There are tares among the wheat (Matt. 13:25); there are the false among the true; there was a Judas among the twelve disciples. We cannot see a person’s faith and we cannot know a person’s heart. We can only observe the way people live, hear the words they speak and witness the deeds that they perform.

¹⁹See the following documents on eternal security:
<http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/security.htm> and
<http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/eshappen.pdf>

C. I. Scofield wrote a chapter on this very subject in his classic work, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*. His chapter is entitled, “Believers and Professors.” He introduces it as follows:

Ever since God has had a people separated to Himself they have been sorely troubled by the presence among them of those who professed to be, but were not, of them. And this will continue until “the Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity...Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:41-43). Scripture plainly tells us of this mingling of tares and wheat—of mere professors among true believers, yet misguided students have frequently applied to the children of God the warnings and exhortations meant only for the self-deceived or hypocritical. [Scofield’s last chapter, opening paragraphs].

Is it possible for a person to make a profession of faith that is not genuine and that does not last? Consider the following comments by fundamentalist writer David Cloud:

Many people have been saved at a church “altar,” but I am reminded of the countless, countless false professions that have been made at Bible Belt altars--hasty, emotional, ignorant, non-repentant decisions, decisions that didn’t last two weeks, let alone a lifetime. I know about this. I grew up in a Baptist church in the Bible Belt. All of the kids that I grew up with made professions of faith at an altar, but I don’t know of even one person that actually got saved then among the Baptist young people I grew up with, if there is such a thing as biblical evidence. I have known of the same thing in a massive number of churches. I have personally communicated with hundreds of people on this subject over the years.

I personally witnessed hundreds of false professions produced by this program at Highland Park Baptist Church in the 1970s. I worked in the bus ministry and in the chapel ministry and pastored one of their chapels. There were 63,000 baptisms at Highland Park during Dr. Lee Roberson’s 40-year pastorate (James Wigton, *Lee Roberson: Always about His Father’s Business*, p. 158). (The number of professions was vastly larger.) If 63,000 people were truly saved during those years, the moral climate of that part of the country would have been dramatically changed, but it wasn’t. In fact, the culture of Chattanooga and the surrounding area grew dramatically more wicked over the decades of the church’s ministry. As for the area of Highland Park itself, it deteriorated shockingly. “A fashionable, up-scale area of the city when Lee Roberson arrived in 1942, by the time he retired it had digressed into a typical ghetto-type area--with drugs, prostitution, and crime” (Wigton, p. 303). Yet a huge number of people in Highland Park had professed Christ and been baptized at the church. —from an email sent by David Cloud on November 28, 2019 entitled, “A Further Conversation About Quick Prayerism.”

The questions we want to answer in this paper are as follows: Did the Lord Jesus ever question a person’s profession of faith? Was the Apostle Paul ever suspicious of a mere profession? What did James think of a person who claimed to have faith but had no works? Did the Apostle John consider a person to be saved as long as he made a profession?

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus

Matthew 3:7-12

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: 9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. 10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: 12 Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

These Jews professed to be the children of Abraham and they believed such an heritage automatically entitled them to spiritual blessings from God (v. 9). Did John the Baptist put much credence in their profession (v. 9)? Did John the Baptist expect true repentance to be accompanied by fruits (v. 8)? What would happen to those not bringing forth good fruit (v. 10)? If John the Baptist warned fruitless people of the spiritual danger they were in, should not we do the same today?

Matthew 7:15-20

15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. 16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? 17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. 19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 20 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

How can we know the difference between the good and the corrupt? What does good fruit indicate? What does evil fruit indicate? Does fruit indicate anything about the tree? Is it wrong to be a fruit inspector if our Lord told us that such false prophets are known by their fruits?²⁰

²⁰Free grace teachers try to get around the obvious force of these verses by saying that the bad fruit that comes forth is not the saved person's wicked works, but it only refers to the false teacher's wicked words (his wicked false teaching). But then they even contradict this by teaching that total apostates are saved, even those who abandon Christ and teach against Christianity. Shouldn't teaching against Christianity be considered false doctrine?

Matthew 7:21-23

21 Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.

These people called Jesus Lord and claimed to do many wonderful works in His name. Did the Lord Jesus question their profession? Were these people saved?

Matthew 7:24-27

24 Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: 25 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. 26 And every one that heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: 27 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

How did the Lord teach us to tell the difference between the wise man and the foolish man? Did it have anything to do with the person's obedience to God's Word?

John 8:39

They answered and said unto Him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.

These Jews professed that Abraham was their father. Did the Lord Jesus believe their profession or did He question it? Compare also John 8:44, "Ye are of your father the devil."

John 10:26-27

But ye believe not, because ye are not of My sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me

Did the Lord indicate how we can identify whether a person is a true sheep? If someone does not follow the Lord Jesus, would this be a reason to question whether this person is really one of His sheep?

The Apostle Paul

2 Timothy 2:19

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

A “seal” is a mark of ownership. The Lord knows those who are His (those who belong to Him). There are many today who name the name of Christ. There are many who call themselves Christians. Paul did not assume that everyone who named the name of Christ was a truly saved individual. Along with the inner seal (which we cannot see) there is the outward evidence: “Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” Paul did not give comfort to those who continued in a wicked lifestyle. If the message of their lips is contradicted by the message of their life, which message are we to believe? Remember the proverb that a person’s actions speak louder than his words.

Titus 1:16

They profess that they know God; but in works they deny Him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.

Here are people who professed that they knew God. “We know the Lord as our personal Saviour!” Did Paul believe their profession or did he question it? With their lips these people said, “We know God,” but the message of their life was different. By their works they denied God and said, “We don’t know God at all.” Paul believed the message of their life over the message of their lips.

James the Brother of the Lord

James 2:14-26

14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? 17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. 18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. 19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. 20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. 24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Is there a difference between a man **saying** that he has faith (verses 14) and a man **showing** that he has faith (verse 18)? Did James believe the profession of the person who claimed to have faith or did he expect such a person to show that his faith was real?

While free grace teachers insist that a true believer can have a dead, lifeless and unproductive faith, this interpretation is contrary to what sound dispensational teachers have long taught, as illustrated by the following:

While we are justified in the sight of God by faith alone, a real faith must be evidenced by works.... There must be life-works, or else there is no life....When people are saved, ought they not to live as such? Ought not the new life to come out in fruits? It must come out if it be in; and if it does not come out, it is not there....It is very interesting and instructive to compare the teaching of Paul and James—two divinely inspired apostles—on the subject of “works.” Paul utterly repudiates law-works. James jealously insists upon life-works. If this fact be seized, all difficulty vanishes; and the divine harmony is clearly seen. —C.H.Mackintosh, *The Mackintosh Treasury*, “Life-Works” (pp. 660-662 in the one volume edition).

Empty profession is of no profit. He who speaks of faith in Christ is responsible to manifest it by his renewed life. In James 2 we are taught that we are justified before men by works, works that are the fruit of a living faith, which is manifest to all....If we believe God we will yield obedience to His Word, and so our faith will be manifested. —H.A.Ironside, *The Continual Burnt Offering*, see under December 7.

Faith merely professed is a dead thing, as a body would be dead if separated from the spirit (v. 26)...”Show me thy faith without thy works.” *Exhibit or let me see, not prove to me.* To show faith to man, works of some kind are necessary. We are

justified in the sight of God when He sees our faith (which He alone can see). We are justified in the sight of man when he sees our good works—fruits of faith.—*The Pilgrim Bible* with E. Schuyler English as Editor-in-Chief, see notes under James 2.

Several of these Scriptures [Scriptures which seem to indicate that a person can lose his salvation] bear on the important fact that Christian profession is justified by its fruits. Salvation which is of God will, under normal conditions, prove itself to be such by its own fruits (1 John 3:10; John 8:31; 15:6; 2 Pet. 1:10; James 2:14-26; 1 Cor. 15:1-2; Heb. 3:6,14). —Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, p.188 (his chapter on “Security”).

Unproductive faith cannot save, because it is not genuine faith. Faith and works are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, and the coupon of faith is not valid if detached from works. —Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible* note under James 2:24.

James teaches that ‘Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone’; it is always attended by good works....A man may hear the truth and even say that he believes, but unless the fruits of living faith are evident in his life, he is not saved at all....Now if I say I have faith, but my life does not correspond to that which I profess, can the faith that I say I have save me? The answer is an emphatic ‘No.’ For a faith that produces no works cannot save anyone. There is no profit in a man claiming to possess something which he actually does not have....True faith necessarily results in fruit after its kind....The work of faith in a true believer will be indicated and proved by good works —Lehman Strauss (Bible Conference Speaker), *James, Your Brother—Studies in the Epistle of James*, pages 103,104,105,110.

James insists that a living faith will authenticate itself in the production of works. There is no antagonism between faith and works. They are not two totally distinct concepts, but rather two inseparable elements in salvation....James demands that the man who already claims to stand in right relationship with God through faith must by a life of good works demonstrate that he has become a new creature in Christ....In this passage [James 2] James insists that a genuine faith must prove itself by its production of works....A saving faith manifests itself in the production of works....Christian faith must manifest its existence in active obedience to God’s Word—D. Edmond Hiebert [noted dispensational commentator], *The Epistle of James—Tests of a Living Faith*, see Chapter 5.

James’ major point is that true faith will express itself in our doing of good works....James distinguishes between true or living faith and dead faith. The former is possessed and the latter is merely professed....What use or profit is there in saying I have faith if there is no corresponding external evidence of that alleged faith? The imaginary person lays claim to be a believer, and may even think he is one, but he gives no evidence of it in his life....Real inner faith wears the outward adornment of works acceptable to God—works undertaken, not in order to become a Christian but because one is a Christian....Genuine faith results in obedience and good works....Good works are the necessary product of genuine faith—Robert P. Lightner, *Solid Stepping Stones For the Christian Journey* (Studies in James), pages 34-38.

A truly genuine faith in God will produce a changed life....a barren faith is really no faith at all....A claim to possess faith is useless if no indications of life transformation are flowing from it....What James was contrasting was true faith, which inevitably produces action because it is alive, versus a mere claim to faith, which is profession only and has no life-changing power—Homer A. Kent, *Faith That Works—Studies in the Epistle of James*, pages 99-110.

Works are the outward proof of the reality of our faith. They give outward expression to what would otherwise be invisible. James insists that a faith that does not result in good works cannot save...James is describing the man who has nothing but a profession of faith. He *says* he has faith, but there is nothing about his life that indicates it—William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, p. 2228.

The Apostle John

1 John 2:4

He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

What is the message of this person's lips? Does he claim to know God? What is the message of this person's life? This disobedient person is a liar. When he professed to know God, it was a lie. In reality, he did not know the Lord at all.

1 John 2:9-11

9 He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. 10 He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. 11 But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.

If a person professes to be in the light, should we always believe that profession? If a person hates his brother, what does this tell us about his claim that he was in the light?

1 John 3:14-15

14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. 15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

Consider a person who claims to be a Christian. He names the name of Christ and says that he is a believer. However, he shows no interest in being with God's people. When the saints meet together on the Lord's Day, he is not among them. He would rather watch football games on Sunday. He shows no desire to fellowship with those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. He also does nothing to meet the needs of fellow Christians. He cared little about ministering to their needs. Do we have the right to question this man's profession of faith? He claims to be saved but certainly does not show any signs of having spiritual life. Is it wrong to doubt his salvation?

A Word of Caution

God has no problem discerning between the true and the false, between a mere professor and a true believer. God knows the hearts of all men. Judas may have fooled the other eleven disciples, but he did not fool the Lord. We do not know the heart and we cannot see whether a person has faith in Christ or not, apart from it's manifestation in life-works. There is not a great outward difference between a carnal Christian and a professing believer who has never truly passed from death unto life. Both are walking according to the flesh, and living as unregenerate men (1 Cor. 3:3). Thankfully, some believers are so devoted to the Saviour and so attached to the Vine that they have made their calling and election sure, and provide daily evidence that they belong to the Son of God. They remind us continually of their vibrant relationship with the Lord. Sadly, there are other professing believers who live in such a way that we really wonder if they have personally experienced the life-changing grace of God. But God is the Judge, not us. God has never given us the ability to distinguish infallibly between the true believer and the false professor. Only God knows for sure them that are His. Our responsibility is to exhort and encourage every believer to love and good works, and so much the more as we see the day approaching (Heb. 10:24-25), and to point every professing believer to the Lord.

Free grace men are greatly concerned lest we should cause a believer to doubt his salvation by insisting that a believer must inevitably manifest, to varying degrees, the lovely virtues of the Lord Jesus and be fruitful unto every good work. However, consider the greater danger of giving false assurance to a person who is a mere professor and not really saved. If the person is unsaved, and we never question his profession or never challenge him as to whether he is a true believer, then we are assuring him that everything is all right when in reality he is bound for hell. What a colossal mistake to deal with a person in such a way!

Consider the other possibility. Suppose the person is a carnal believer who shows very little evidence of salvation. Out of concern for his soul, we share with this person that we are not sure he is really saved due to the fact that he rarely shows his faith by life-works. In other words, since he is living like a child of the devil, we wonder if perhaps he might really be a child of the devil, and we challenge him along these lines. Since this carnal one is really saved, we are not damaging his eternal destiny. If nothing else, we are encouraging him to walk worthy of his profession. "Dear Friend, if you are really a child of God, live like one and live in such a way that no one will ever doubt your salvation. Make your calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10). Let your light so shine before men that they will see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matt. 5:16)."

Why do free grace men teach that no one is ever permitted to question a person's salvation or to doubt their profession? If a true believer does not have assurance of salvation, that is a problem. We need to help him understand what God's Word teaches about assurance. But this problem is not worthy to be compared with the problem of an unsaved professing believer who is given false assurance that he has eternal life. His eternal soul is in great danger. God help us.

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