

How can a Christian combat apostasy?

A believer in Colombia asked, *How can a Christian combat apostasy? Can a genuine Christian apostatize?*

Dear José,

How do we combat apostasy? My answer may appear strange, but it seems to me the biblical one: don't combat it!

Instead of fighting those who have left Christianity, it is better to minister to the faithful, teaching them how to lead others to Christ.

For example, our seminaries teach how to refute the arguments of theological liberals. I do not know of a single theological liberal who has ever been persuaded and converted by such arguments. That is like arguing with the devil. It is a waste of time.

Apostasy, as I see it, involves the abandonment of the Christian faith. This definition does not include Christians who hold to seriously false doctrines. The preferred term for that is *heresy*. While apostasy may include heresy, not all heresy is apostasy.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:11,12

These verses show how God may give a person over to apostasy because they lack a love for truth. It may be God's will to leave such people in his hands.

When supposed "disciples" turned their back on Jesus because of some difficult sayings, he did not pursue them for restoration.

When I encounter a truly apostate individual, one who previously professed the Christian faith but since abandoned it, my procedure is to make one attempt to persuade and warn him of impending judgment. With these, as well as blatant heretics, the apostle warns us to show no patience.

As for a person who stirs up division, [or heresy], after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him. Titus 3:10

Can a genuine, born-again Christian fall into apostasy?

No. Jesus will preserve him from that.

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

1 John 3:9

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. 1 John 5:18

A central theme of 1 John is how to distinguish between true Christians and those who merely concur with a Christian worldview as a wholesome way of life. John gives us a clue.

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. 1 John 2:19

Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession says a genuine Christian may fall into a serious sin, but that will be temporary because God will restore him.

This complicates the question. If apostasy or serious sin in the life of a believer were a simple matter, First John would not exist. The apostle himself insinuates it may be difficult to discern the difference between a Christian temporarily in a state of sin versus those who were never converted in the first place. Paul recommends,

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. 2 Timothy 2:24-26

The issues are complex but God will give you discernment in the context of your ministry.

Blessings,

Roger

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