

Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*.

APOSTASY Turning against God, as evidenced by abandonment and repudiation of former beliefs. The term generally refers to a deliberate renouncing of the faith by a once sincere believer rather than a state of ignorance or mistaken knowledge. Apostasy is distinguished from heresy (denial of a part of the faith) and from transfer of allegiance from one religious body to another within the same faith. Also, it is possible to deny the faith, as Peter once did, and then at a later time reaffirm it.

Originally, “apostasy” meant literal rebellion. Thus the Jews were described as “rebels” against King Artaxerxes (1 Esd 2:23) and Jason as a “rebel against the laws” (2 Macc 5:6–8). OT descriptions of spiritual rebellion include departure from the law, forsaking temple worship, and willful disobedience toward God himself (Jos 22:22; 2 Chr 29:19; Jer 2:19). The prophetic writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah provide many examples of Israel’s defections (Is 1:2–4; Jer 2:19). Israelite kings were often guilty of apostasy: Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:22–24); Ahab (1 Kgs 16:30–33); Ahaziah (1 Kgs 22:51–53); Jehoram (2 Chr 21:6, 10); Ahaz (2 Chr 28:1–4); Manasseh (2 Chr 33:1–19); Amon (2 Chr 33:21–23).

In NT times many disciples withdrew from Christ (Jn 6:66)—the most notorious example being Judas Iscariot. The Greek word from which “apostasy” is derived appears in only two passages. The apostle Paul was accused of apostasy for teaching others “to turn their backs on the laws of Moses” (Acts 21:21, NLT). And apostasy is given an eschatological (end times) significance in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Christians were warned not to be carried away and deceived in the widespread apostasy to come in the end times before the Lord’s return. That apostasy is linked to the rise of a man of rebellion who will be Satan’s tool (2 Thes 2:3–12; cf. 1 Tm 4:1–3).

WARNINGS AGAINST APOSTASY

Many NT passages, using different words, convey warnings against apostasy. In the last days, tribulation and persecution will cause many to “fall away” (Mt 24:9–10); false prophets will arise and “lead many astray” (Mt 24:11). Other causes of apostasy include temptation (Lk 8:13) and unbelief (Heb 3:12). Paul cited Hymenaeus and Alexander as examples of those who had rejected the faith (1 Tm 1:20). The writer of Hebrews referred to those who had believed and then departed from the faith as being in a hopeless state—with no possibility of further repentance (Heb 6:1–6). The consequences of willful sinning after receiving Christ are terrifying (Heb 10:26–31). The apostle Peter said that, for believers in Christ who knowingly turned away, “they are worse off than before” (2 Pt 2:20–22). The apostle John addresses this same problem (1 Jn 2:18–19).

Zuck, R. B., Bock, D. L., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1996, c1994). *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*.

THE DEPARTURE FROM THE TRUTH

All false teaching has one trait in common: a departure from revealed truth. Besides being deficient in personal morality, the errorists ended up where they did because of what they left behind. They left what was true to pursue what was false (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3). Paul used a series of graphic words to impress his readers with such deviation.

Wandering. The Greek word *astochēō* in 1 Timothy 1:6 portrayed the idea “wide of the mark or to shoot past the goal.”¹⁵ This is a fitting expression since, in the previous verse, Paul had stated that the goal of his instruction was love from a “pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (v. 5). The false teachers had obviously bypassed this defining purpose as they “wandered” away to other interests.

Rejecting. Equally graphic is the term for their “rejection” of faith and a good conscience (1 Tim. 1:19). This term (*apōtheō*) was used for violent and willful rejection in Acts 7:39; 13:46; and Romans 11:2. Even the result in the immediate context of 1 Timothy 1:19 illustrated such violence since it caused the “shipwreck” of the faith of Hymenaeus and Alexander (v. 20). The future expectation, as predicted by Paul, did not look any brighter.

Apostatizing. By the revelation of the Spirit of God, Paul predicted a moral and spiritual apostasy (*apostasia*, 1 Tim. 4:1) as the last days approach. What began as a departure from the truth will result in the seduction by demons and their doctrines (vv. 2–3). According to Paul, this had already begun among some gullible women at Ephesus (2 Tim. 3:6) and men such as Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17–18).¹⁶

Bankrupt. As a result of being led away by the controversial heresies, some were “robbed of the truth” (1 Tim. 6:5). As Guthrie commented, “When reason is morally blinded, all correctives to unworthy behavior are banished, and the mind becomes destitute . . . of the truth.”¹⁷ First Timothy 6:10 and 21 further comment that the false teachers “wandered away from the faith” for the pursuit of monetary gain and the profession of an elitist claim of superior spiritual insight.¹⁸ The danger of such a “turning away” was illustrated in 2 Timothy 4:4 where Paul used a medical term, *ektrepō*, that meant in everyday Greek to wrench a limb out of joint.¹⁹ Ironically, the first and last reference to departure refers to the myths into which the false teachers veered. When truth is sacrificed, only what is mythological is left to be invented or investigated.

THE DIVISIVE DOCTRINES

Evidence in the Pastoral Epistles suggests the error was not a fully developed system of thought.²⁰ The message of the false teachers seems to have been a mixture of Jewish tradition and Gnostic asceticism. “While there were undoubtedly minor differences between the false teaching in Ephesus and Crete, the features seem to be common, and there is strong justification for regarding them as separate manifestations of a general contemporary tendency.”²¹

The Jewish flavor. The Jewish flavor of the heresy emerges in their devotion to the study of genealogies and myths and their desire to be teachers of the law (1 Tim. 1:3, 7; Titus 3:9). Scholars interpret these terms as referring to either fictitious Jewish speculations about the Pentateuch, especially the genealogies, or the Gnostic doctrine about origins. “Viewed in this light, the errorists are Judaizers who concentrate on far-fetched minutiae of rabbinical exegesis to the detriment of the gospel.”²² They were also identified as “those of the circumcision group” (Titus 1:10).²³

The Gnostic trend. Early Gnostic influences were reflected in their prohibitions against marriage and certain foods (1 Tim. 4:3) and the pursuit of what Paul said is “falsely called knowledge” (6:20; cf. 1:4, 6; 4:7; 6:4).²⁴ As was true with most Gnostic variations, this teaching led to asceticism on the one hand and it excused greed and sensual indulgence on the other. Both extremes are always the logical ends of such a philosophy. Marriage was forbidden and certain distinctions between clean and unclean foods were re-instituted (4:3, 8; 5:23; Titus 1:15) under the guise that such practices insured a higher form of holiness. One significant doctrine which had to be adjusted to fit their views was the Resurrection. Hymenaeus and Alexander went so far as to deny the resurrection of the body by advocating it had been spiritually fulfilled (2 Tim. 2:17–18).²⁵ They were also engaged in argumentation over the meaning of words (2:14, 16, 23; 4:4; Titus 3:9). Some have suggested they may have even gone so far in their degeneration as to have been involved in the Ephesian mystery rites (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:13).

Meaningless value. The great masquerade in the false teaching involved superficial claims to godliness, which Paul viewed as hypocritical (2 Tim. 3:2–5). Paul’s condemnation of the teaching surfaces in the pejorative words Paul used to expose them. Their discussions were meaningless (1 Tim. 1:6) and godless (6:10; 2 Tim. 2:23). Worse than everything else, all the false teaching contradicted the sound instruction and godly teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 6:3). Furthermore, throughout these letters Paul used the word “myths” (*mythois*, 1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14) to describe their teaching as devoid of truth and Christian reality.

THE DESTRUCTIVE RESULTS

The teachers’ corrupting influence became one of the major reasons for Paul’s taking so much time to expose this error. Their immoral character and the inroads their doctrine was beginning to have within the church demanded Paul’s urgent attention. Such unwanted elements produced confusion and promoted controversies diametrically opposed to God’s work and message of grace through faith (1 Tim. 1:4). Both those who taught and those who listened were adversely affected. If not stopped, the imposters would only proceed from bad to worse, spreading like gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17; cf. 3:13), becoming more and more ungodly (2:16), with the inevitable grief and judgment they had invited on themselves (1 Tim. 6:10).

Equally dangerous was the effect on those who listened to deception. Paul stated that quarrels were generated (2 Tim. 2:23) which resulted in strife, suspicion, and schisms (1 Tim. 6:4–5). Such quarrels over words ruined the hearers because it tended to undermine their faith (2 Tim. 2:14, 18). At Ephesus, the extent of the influence was exposed. The false teachers had wormed their way into the houses of weak-willed women (2 Tim. 3:6) to such an extent that some were already viewed as having followed Satan himself (2 Tim. 5:15).

THE DRASTIC TREATMENT

Both Timothy and Titus needed to take a strong stand against the false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:14; Titus 1:13).²⁶ Paul's counsel ranged from the need to be alert all the way to exercising the final stages of church discipline. These young leaders needed to encourage action by those who might be affected and to take action toward the false teachers themselves. Warnings were given for the immediate as well as the eschatological expectations. For those in the church, Paul advocated avoiding the teachers (2 Tim. 3:5, 9) as well as their "godless chatter" (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16) and "stupid arguments" (2 Tim. 2:23; cf. Titus 3:9). Three specific reasons were given for the latter: (1) the chatter and quarreling led to further ungodliness (2 Tim. 2:16); (2) it spread like gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17); and (3) it was unprofitable (Titus 3:9). Warning the Ephesians about the present and future deviations that would precede the eschatological judgment could help stem the tide (1 Tim. 4:1–3). Second Timothy 4:15 warned the Ephesian church to be on guard. Both Timothy and Titus should protect the church by disallowing (silencing) the false teachers from promoting their errors (1 Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:11). The method of silencing them was outlined for Titus in 1:11–13 and 3:10–11. First the errorists must be rebuked sharply with a view toward restoration (Titus 1:11). If after two warnings there was still no response, the divisive person was to be shunned (Titus 3:10–11). Ultimately, they were to be "handed over to Satan" in order to prevent the presence of such blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:20).

CONCLUSION

Towner is right when he says, "it is clear from the verbal assault that the false teachers rejected, undermined, diluted, or otherwise perverted the apostolic gospel."²⁷ To answer such hostile attacks, Paul set forth for his associates and their communities a foundational understanding of the essential connections between God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the basics of the message of salvation.

15 15. Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 69.

16 16. The verb *astacheō*, used in [2 Timothy 2:18](#), was introduced in [1 Timothy 1:6](#) and [6:21](#).

These are the only three occurrences of this verb in the New Testament.

17 17. Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 112. As Fee observes, "Believers have come to know the truth ([2:4](#); [4:3](#); [2 Tim. 2:25](#)); these men have been robbed of it (cf. [2 Tim. 2:18](#); [3:7–8](#); [4:4](#))" (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 142).

18 18. More will be said about this "so-called knowledge" under the discussion of the nature of the false doctrine.

19 19. This verb also appears in [1 Timothy 1:6](#); [5:15](#); [6:20](#); and [Hebrews 12:13](#).

20 20. Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 28; Kelly, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 10–12; and J. B. Lightfoot, "The Date of the Pastoral Epistles," in *Biblical Essays* (London:Macmillan, 1893), 412.

21 21. Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 35. For the differences between the Gnostic trends addressed in the Pastoral Epistles and the more formalized Gnosticism of the second century, see Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 36–38.

22 22. Kelly, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 45.

23 23. Scholars debate whether the reference to the "circumcision group" is a reference to teachings about the practice of circumcision or a Pauline epithet for a Jewish-oriented sect claiming special understanding or status ([Gal. 2:12](#); [Acts 11:2](#); [Col. 4:11](#)). For the arguments for both sides, see Arlund Hultgren, *I–II Timothy, Titus*, Augsburg Commentary on the New

Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1984), 45–46.

[24](#) [24](#). These ascetic practices were similar to those addressed in [Colossians 2:16, 20–22](#). For other problems with food, see [1 Corinthians 8–10](#) and [Romans 14](#).

[25](#) [25](#). Towner believes that the false views of the Resurrection arose from a misunderstanding of eschatological realism from Paul's promise of living with Christ as in [Romans 6:8](#) (*Goal of Our Instruction*, 31–32).

[26](#) [26](#). As for the charge that Paul dealt differently with the false teachers in the Pastoral Epistles than he did in Colossians, one needs to remember that in the Pastorals the apostle was speaking to his associates who knew the content of the Christian faith, whereas in Colossians he was refuting the errors of the heretics for the benefit of the church members.

[27](#) [27](#). Towner, *Goal of Our Instruction*, 25.