

Moral and Theological Apostasy

Updated 10/25/2009

Believers are Worse

Is it possible to commit moral apostasy without having first committed theological apostasy? If so, does moral apostasy in and of itself result in the loss of eternal life? The answers to such questions naturally have a significant impact upon one's view of apostasy. And 1Tim 5:8 (within its context and with its clearest cross-references) provides the focal point for answering such questions. The moral apostasy described in 1Tim 5:8 implements the Greek word *cheiron* (*worse*) to describe defective believers. No less than three times, this same word is used to describe such believers as being:

- *Worse than* unbelievers (1Tim 5:8).
- Subject to *worse* punishment *than* rebellious OT believers (Heb 10:29).
- In a *worse* state *than* at first (2Pet 2:20).

Heb 10:29

The passage in Hebrews deals with the case of believers who subjectively defect from the faith by means of theological apostasy: "How much *worse* punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Heb 10:29; TM). This full-fledged form of apostasy marks the defector as having completely departed from the faith. An Arminian will assert that such a person is no longer a believer,¹ loses eternal life, and will be worse off in hell than his OT counterparts. To Forlines' credit, he attempts to limit the loss of eternal life to theological apostasy so that he can affirm that salvation is by faith alone.² But in light of the other two passages cited above, his attempt to maintain salvation by faith alone by restricting the forfeiture of eternal life to theological apostasy is open to serious question.

2Pet 2:20

In the other two passages, believers defect from the faith in a practical manner while still remaining in the faith in terms of theological profession. They still believe in Christ, but for all practical purposes they deny Christ by the way they live. In 2Pet 2:20, for example, believers become morally entangled after having morally escaped: "For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first." However, the text does not indicate that their moral failure had necessarily ensued from a complete theological departure from the faith. Thus, this practical apostasy does not appear as thoroughgoing as the theological apostasy described in the book of Hebrews. But the observation that moral apostasy does not necessarily mark subjective departure from the faith discredits Forlines' noble attempt to limit the loss of regeneration to the lack of perseverance in faith.

The majority opinion among Arminians, as expressed by Shank and Marshall, co-conditions the retention of regeneration on perseverance in faithfulness. This majority perspective in the Arminian camp is superior exegetically to Forlines' attempt to condition the retention of regeneration to perseverance in faith alone.³ Of course, Forlines would agree with his Arminian counterparts that moral apostates are spiritually dead, but where he would part company with his fellow conditionalists is in placing moral defection after theological departure. In other words, Forlines' hypothesis presumes that the moral apostates have already defected from the faith theologically. By placing moral apostasy after theological apostasy, he hopes to avoid the conclusion that he is teaching moral security—a security conditioned on one's morality. Instead, he wants to be perceived as conditioning salvation on faith alone.

However, the assumption that moral apostasy was preceded by theological apostasy in 2Pet 2:20 must be read into the text rather than from it. One could just as easily maintain that the moral apostates in this passage simply followed the example of the false teachers in turning the grace of God into licentiousness (cp. Jude 1:4). The postulation that these morally entangled believers abandoned the faith itself is without

For further explanation, see my upcoming book *The Outer Darkness*.

Marty A. Cauley © Copyright 2008

Misthologist@misthology.org

foundation, much less that they had abandoned the faith before becoming entangled in this moral web of lies. The more reasonable supposition is that these believers are simply denying the Master morally rather than theologically. To speak idiomatically, they want to have their cake and eat it too. They simultaneously want the grace of God and the pleasure of sin. As a result, they have abandoned *the faith* morally but not *their faith* theologically. They had not abandoned the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. On the contrary, they were standing firm in the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, but they were abusing it. They thought it was quite alright if that faith were alone. But they were quite mistaken.

Conditionalists would criticize such believers as being guilty of carnal security. At the very least, those in the conditionalistic camp insist that so-called carnal Christians cannot be sure of their salvation. More often than not, conditionalists will further insist that carnal security is false security, that those believers living in a carnal lifestyle were either not saved or have lost their salvation. Gross immorality must be avoided by those believers who hope to make it to heaven. Marrowists would criticize conditionalists as trying to offset carnal security with moral security. Conditionalism is rejected in Marrowism as teaching salvation by works in the guise of moral performance. Forlines endeavors to avoid this criticism by limiting his conditionalism to perseverance in faith. One loses eternal life by defecting from the faith. Gross moral failure may follow, but the moral apostate has already lost eternal life when he defected from the faith. By means of this argument, Forlines intends to condition one's security on faith alone.

1Tim 5:8

Forlines' sequence stumbles badly, however, when it encounters the third text: "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has *denied* the faith and is *worse than* an unbeliever" (1Tim 5:8). The crucial questions are: "In what sense has this apostate *denied, repudiated, disowned (arneomai)* the faith? Is the person in question no longer a believer or no longer considered a believer?" The weight of the evidence is decisively opposed to Forlines' imposition upon the doctrine of moral apostasy.

The Faith

Like Forlines, Lenski shares the Arminian perspective that apostates lose eternal life. Nevertheless, Lenski concurs with our assessment that the person in question in 1Tim 5:8 is a believer: "Paul does not say that he *has lost his* faith" (bold mine).⁴ What the moral apostate abandons is *the faith* not *his faith* (i.e., this apostate departs from *the* objective faith not *his* subjective faith). Lenski bases this assessment in part upon the articular construction of the term. Granted, the articular construction was used earlier in the epistle (1Tim 1:19) to refer to an objective apostasy that entails subjective apostasy where some apostates suffered shipwreck of *the faith* and in doing so lost *their faith* (NAS). Their objective apostasy was theologically subjective. However, the apostasy in 1Tim 5:8 is explicitly limited by Paul to the moral arena. The moral apostate on this occasion does not lose *his faith*—his faith remains theologically and subjectively intact. This particular morally dysfunctional believer is still a believer.

Given a premise of eternal security, the securitist would assume that even though this carnal believer acts worse than the unsaved, this carnal believer remains saved. But Shank appeals to the context to object to Chafer's listing 1Tim 5:8 as a proof text for eternal security. One can certainly understand Shank's consternation. Is the securitist not begging the question by assuming that the carnal believer is still saved when just two verses earlier Paul affirms that the moral apostate is *dead*? According to Arminians such as Lenski, Marshall, Shank, the moral apostate in 1Tim 5:6 is *spiritually dead*. So how can advocates of eternal security ignore the obvious implication of the context which implies that the moral apostate in 1Tim 5:8 is spiritually dead as well?

Our objective is to use the Arminian argument as advanced by Lenski, Marshall, and Shank to limit the number of contenders on the playing field. By momentarily adopting their premise of conditional security, we will thoroughly dispense with Forlines' hypothesis that moral defection is necessarily preceded by theological defection.

Worse Than

Paul explicitly states that the moral apostate in 5:8 is worse than an unbeliever. Paul is not making a nonsensical statement to the effect that the person is an unbeliever who is worse than an unbeliever. After all, how could an unbeliever be worse than an unbeliever? Or as Hart aptly expresses it: “One cannot be an unbeliever and be *worse than* an unbeliever at the same time!”⁵ Paul’s contrastive use of *cheiron* (*worse*) demands that this moral apostate be regarded as a believer. Marshall acknowledges that the moral apostate is a nominal believer. Of course, for Marshall this means that the person is now a believer in name only. This perspective might be expressed by describing such a believer as being a shell of the person he was before he committed moral apostasy. The moral apostate no longer has eternal life within him, so he is an empty shell. Even so, by Marshall’s own admission, moral apostates are *nominal believers* and therefore still bear the name *believer*.⁶ Hence, such a person still believes in Christ. Therefore, on the basis of Lenski’s articular observation and even more so on the basis of Marshall’s nominal admission, it may be deduced that the person in this text is still implicitly regarded by Paul as having faith in Christ. But this observation drives a stake in the heart of Forlines’ argument.

Arminian Death

Marshall and Shank cite 1Tim 5:8 in conjunction with its contextual equivalent in 1Tim 5:6 to indicate that a believer who becomes morally worse than an unbeliever becomes spiritually dead (i.e., unregenerate). Although moral apostasy is considered a practical (rather than theological) denial of the faith by advocates of this persuasion, moral apostasy is nevertheless regarded as being just as soteriological lethal. Believers who subcome to moral apostasy lose eternal life, and according to Shank, they may quite possibly lose it without even knowing it. Such believers still have faith, but it is no longer saving faith. Since saving faith is generally perceived by insecureists as consisting of perseverance in faith-works, moral defection from works is thought to be just as deadly as theological defection from the faith. After all, faith without works is *dead* (Jam 2:17). So according to Arminians, a person who has faith but no longer has works is no longer *saved*. Being dead is thus made equivalent to being unsaved. This composite Arminian approach demolishes Forlines’ argument that eternal security can be conditioned on perseverance in faith alone.

Composite Arminian Argument

1. Moral apostates are spiritually dead (1Tim 5:6).
2. Theological believers can be moral apostates (1Tim 5:8).
3. Therefore, theological believers can be moral apostates and lose eternal life without losing their faith since they are still theological believers.

Basically, by pitting Lenski, Marshall, and Shank against Forlines, we have been able to use their contestation to destroy Forlines’ contention that Arminian security can be conditioned on perseverance in faith alone. Far to the contrary, when considered exegetically and if given logical consistency, Arminian security necessarily conditions eternal security on perseverance in both faith and works. The loss of eternal life cannot be limited to theological apostasy. Moral apostasy may occur before theological apostasy. And if moral apostasy occurs first, the apostate loses eternal life before he loses his faith. Conditionalists cannot affirm salvation by faith alone. They must avow salvation by faith-works.

Moral Denial

Having established that Arminians must condition their salvation on both faith and works (a point which is readily evident in mainstream Arminianism anyway), we will now turn our attention to Shank’s contestation that the loss of eternal life is contextually in view when Paul says that moral apostates have *denied the faith*. Paul uses *deny* (*arneomai*) again in Tit 1:16 in a related example regarding moral apostasy: “They [morally apostate believers] profess to know God, but by their deeds they *deny* Him.” As far as such believers are concerned, they do not disown God. It is by their deeds rather than their lips deny Christ. A moral denial rather than a theological denial is clearly intended by Paul here. In view of 1Tim 5:8, the presumption should be that Paul regards these moral apostates in Tit 1:16 as still believing in Christ since he limits their denial to their works.

For further explanation, see my upcoming book *The Outer Darkness*.

Marty A. Cauley © Copyright 2008

Misthologist@misthology.org

By Works

The Greek word for *deeds* is *ergon*, which is the typical Greek word for *works*. The expression *by works* in Tit 1:16 is a dative of means, which means that works are the instrumental means by which the moral apostate denies Christ. For example, when Paul says that “a man is justified *by faith* apart from works” (Rom 3:28), he likewise uses the dative of means to show that faith is the instrumental means by which we are saved. Since it is *by works* that the professing believer denies Christ in Tit 1:16, and since it is by this ergonic denial that the moral apostate loses his salvation in Arminianism, the Arminian is found to be teaching salvation by works. Arminianism twists itself into many pitiful knots in trying to assert that we are saved by faith apart from works but unsaved by works.⁷

Misthology, in contrast, does not have any problem with ergonic salvation because it recognizes that a salvation by faith apart from works cannot be equated with a salvation by faith and works. The later is ergonic, the former is not. But this recourse is not available to the Arminian. The only hope Arminianism had in this discussion of moral apostasy by which to maintain salvation by faith alone was the minority opinion offered by Forlines. However, the majority opinion among Arminians obliterates that hope because the mainstream perception correctly deduces that moral apostasy may predate theological apostasy. The expression, “He was dead before he hit the floor,” may be aptly applied to the moral apostate, “He was dead before his faith hit the floor.” As far as Paul is concerned in 1Tim 5:8 (and probably in Tit 1:16), the believer who fails morally is still a believer theologically. According to the Arminian, such a believer dies spiritually. Consequently, for the Arminian, morality is the means to immortality. The Arminian antidote to carnal security is moral security. This statement holds true even for those Arminians who may try to take Forlines’ approach. We have demonstrated this deduction by examining 1Tim 5:8, but in *Mere Christianity and Moral Christianity* we take a completely different tract by which to document this fact from the pen of C. S. Lewis.⁸

Profession

A word, and only a word, needs be said regarding the Reformed camp in regard to moral apostasy. In their attempt to try to explain away the enigma that exists between conditional security and morality, those in the Reformed camp seize upon the word *profess* in Tit 1:16: “They *profess* to know God, but by their works they deny Him” (TM). The Reformed quip will be, “Moral apostates are professors not possessors of eternal life. By means of their works, moral apostates necessarily nullify their profession and demonstrate their lack of possession.” Bottom line, the Reformed tactic is to deny that those who morally deny the faith were ever saved in the beginning. Perhaps such a tactic might be plausible in Tit 1:16, but one would have to bury one’s head in the sand to ignore the fact that the apostate was indeed a genuine believer in the related cross-reference of 1Tim 5:8.

While it is the moral apostate who professes to be a believer in Tit 1:16, it is Paul who professes that the moral apostate is a believer in 1Tim 5:8. By acknowledging that the moral apostate is worse than an unbeliever, Paul implicitly refuses to (necessarily) regard the moral apostate as an unbeliever. To the contrary, Paul matter-of-factly regards the moral apostate as a believer in that verse. Hendriksen is therefore in error when he asseverates: “Lack of positive action, the sin of omission, gives the lie to his profession of *faith* (subjective sense).”⁹ To the contrary, Lenski is correct to reject the notion of subjective apostasy in this passage. In any event, the implicit profession of subjective faith on the part of the apostate comes from the pen of Paul, not merely from the lips of the apostate. To be sure, there is an incongruity between lips and life of the moral apostate in Tit 1:16, but it is not a soteriological incongruity between his profession and possession of eternal life. Paul denies that the moral apostate in that passage knows God. Even if one were to define eternal life as knowing God (Jn 17:3), one would still have to discuss the potential difference between having eternal life and experiencing it. But even apart from such considerations, Paul’s statement need not be construed as meaning soteric knowledge. Carnal Christians do not know God the same way that Paul knows God. Certainly, immature believers do not have the same knowledge of God that mature believers do.¹⁰

Silent Killer

When 1Tim 5:8 and Tit 1:16 are viewed jointly, it becomes apparent that moral apostasy may result from either sins of omission or sins of commission. The believer who has fallen into moral apostasy may still be sincerely professing to know God and thereby reveal that he is not even aware that he has committed apostasy.

For further explanation, see my upcoming book *The Outer Darkness*.

Marty A. Cauley © Copyright 2008

Misthologist@misthology.org

As Shank correctly notes: “He still professes faith, and all seems well to him. He is quite unaware of his apostasy.”¹¹ This Arminian argument by Shank refutes the Arminian argument by Forlines that life-stealing apostasy is limited to willful, presumptuous, high-handed sins. All forms of apostasy are deadly. The believer who subcomes to moral apostasy is a living corpse even though she (1Tim 5:6) or he (1Tim 5:8) still believes in Christ for eternal life.

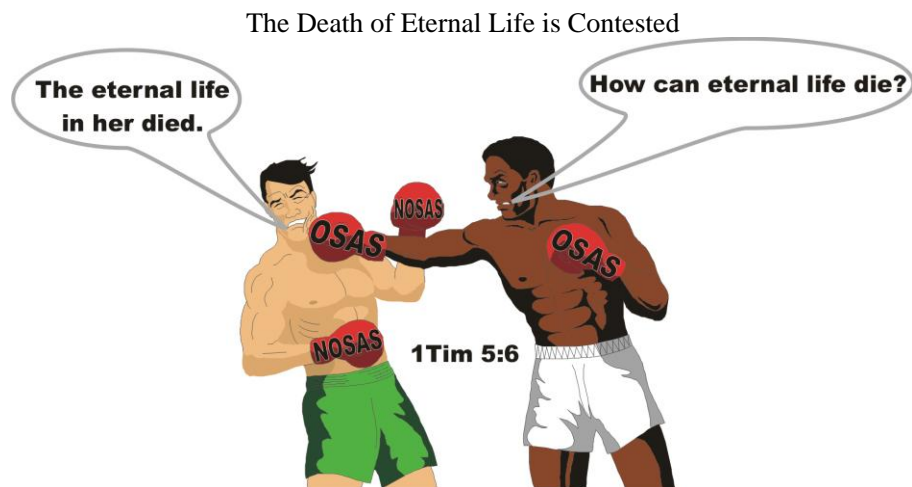
McCoy also suggests that moral apostasy is the subject matter in another related passage: “Specifically in 2 Tim 2:12b the denial in view is not a single act of denial of sinful selfishness but is rather descriptive of a general failure or breakdown in discipleship.”¹² Even those believers who deny Christ by simply living a life that demonstrates a general failure in discipleship will be denied by Christ. If a believer slowly retrogresses morally, who is to say at what point along the way that such a believer loses his or her spiritual vitality. Would it not be a slow, imperceptible death as Shank maintains? We cannot agree with Shank that such a death would be soteriological, but we can certainly agree with him that it could be imperceptible.¹³

Half-Hearted Security

A half-hearted affirmation of conditional security, such as that offered by Forlines, is hardly adequate to deal with the observations that come from a careful study regarding the ramifications of moral apostasy. The full-fledged conditional security provided by the advocates of the majority opinion is much truer to the texts dealing with such apostasy. The death dealing effects of apostasy cannot be limited to theological apostasy or to high-handed sins. The arguments provided by Lenski, Marshall, and Shank are also superior to the half-hearted attempt at eternal security found in the Reformed camp. One cannot stand on the sidelines and claim that the only people susceptible to moral apostasy are those who falsely profess to have faith in Christ. If one is going to actually enter into the arena to contend for the faith, where the text stands as referee, one must admit that Paul is the one legitimately professing that genuine believers may subcome to moral apostasy.

Heavy Weight Contenders

Lightweight contenders, such as Forlines and Hendriksen, have already been disqualified from stepping into this heavyweight ring to engage in exegetically battle regarding the impact of moral apostasy. Only two heavyweight contenders are exegetically qualified to face off in this hermeneutical matchup between NOSAS and OSAS. Full-fledged conditional security stands in one corner, while full-fledged unconditional security is chomping at the bit in the other corner.



At the opening bell, Lenski immediately launches a NOSAS jab: “The spiritual life in her died.”¹⁴ But this comment opens Lenski up to an immediate counterpunch by OSAS: “How can eternal life die?” After this almost devastating right cross, the sports announcer hurriedly informs the fans: “This spiritual life is eternal life.” In the ensuing flurry of punches from OSAS which follow, OSAS asks pounding questions, such as, “Why must being dead signify loss of regeneration in either 1Tim 5:6 or Jam 2:17? Why could it not simply

For further explanation, see my upcoming book *The Outer Darkness*.

Marty A. Cauley © Copyright 2008

Misthologist@misthology.org

signify practical death, familial death, soulful death, dynamic death, or misthological death?¹⁵ Why must denial of Christ by works in 2Tim 2:12 result in a denial by Christ of faith?" At the conclusion of the fight, everyone agreed that it was a well fought and well worth attending.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the broader significance regarding the case of moral apostasy in 1Tim 5:8 and its death dealing impact affirmed two verses earlier in 1Tim 5:6 to conclude that the moral apostasy in 1Tim 5:8 results in the moral death described in 1Tim 5:6 so that Forlines cannot limit the deadly affects of apostasy to theological apostasy. Therefore, the deadly affects of apostasy must ultimately be based on morality.¹⁶ The half-hearted attempts at unconditional security and conditional security by the Reformed camp and by some in the Arminian camp respectively have been found too seriously flawed within spectrum of this discussion to be allowed serious contention. They are not serious contenders. The only exegetically valid alternatives when studying these texts are full-fledged conditional security versus full-fledged unconditional security found in two opposing camps. The conditionalistic camp finds representation by Lenski, Marshall, and Shank. The unconditional camp finds representatives in writings of Hart, McCoy, and the present author. A full-fledged fight on the part of the present author should be well worth the price of the admission ticket but will have to await the publication of his two books: *The Outer Darkness* and *Mere Christianity and Moral Christianity*. Until such time, the following exegetical possibilities offered by OSAS for the three primary passages dealing with *cheiron* may be noted:

- Morally apostate believers are *worse than* unbelievers in the way they act (1Tim 5:8).
- Theologically apostate believers are temporally and misthologically *worse off than* OT believers who suffered a quick, temporal death (Heb 10:29).
- Morally apostate believers are temporally *worse than* and misthologically *worse off than* they were as immature believers when they first came to faith (2Pet 2:20).

¹ Although we contend that even the theological apostate may still be regarded a believer in some sense of the word, we concur with the Arminian that such an apostate no longer consciously believes in Christ.

² See discussion in *The Outer Darkness* for citations and further weakness.

³ Shank (*Life in Son*, 192, 335) and Marshall (*Kept*, 129) are clear Arminian examples of exegetes who condition the retention of regeneration on a believer's perseverance in good works.

⁴ Lenski, *First Timothy*, 664.

⁵ John F. Hart, "Why Confess Christ? The Use and Abuse of Romans 10:9-10." *JOTGES* 12:23 (Autumn 1999): 9-10, n. 20.

⁶ Since the moral apostate still implicitly bears the name *believer* in 1Tim 5:8, the Arminian must either concede that the person in question is a nominal believer and thus still believes in Christ, or the Arminian must concede to our argument as given elsewhere that a person remains a believer even if he ceases to believe! Since we have used the latter argument in *Outer Darkness* to defend OSAS, we will limit our response herein to the ground already conceded by Marshall in the former option.

⁷ For demonstrations of the knots into which Shank ties himself, see the present author's book *The Outer Darkness*.

⁸ For arguments against using morality as a means to immortality, see the present author's book *Mere Christianity and Moral Christianity*. As will be seen in that discussion, even if Forlines were successful in evading the assessment of his fellow Arminians who directly condition retention of regeneration on one's moral performance, he would still have to contend with the admission of other Arminians that perseverance in faith is a moral virtue. In order to prove that he does not condition salvation on moral virtue, he would have to disprove the affirmation that perseverance in faith is a moral virtue. But there again, we join hands with Forlines' fellow Arminians in demonstrating that perseverance in faith is a moral virtue. He cannot win for losing. Even if Arminian security could be shown not to be conditioned on moral apostasy, it would still be conditioned on perseverance in faith, which is a moral virtue. Arminians trip all over one another in trying to avoid the implications of their theology. Morality is the means to immortality in Arminianism. One simply cannot condition salvation on faith alone while simultaneously conditioning salvation on perseverance in faith. Moral virtue, merit, and works will slip in through the door of perseverance.

⁹ Hendriksen, *1 Timothy*, 171. Emphasis his.

¹⁰ See “Know God” in *The Outer Darkness* for substantiation.

¹¹ Shank, *Life*, 200.

¹² Brad McCoy “Secure Yet Scrutinized: 2 Timothy 2:11-13.” *JOTGES* 1:1 (Autumn 1988): 28.

¹³ Among other things, we cannot agree with Shank that loss of regeneration would be imperceptible because we do not believe that it can only be partial. One cannot be a little bit born again anymore than one can be a little bit pregnant. One is either pregnant or one is not. One either has spiritual life or one does not. But we do admit that believers can be half-dead, mostly dead, or even completely death when it comes to living life by the power of the Spirit. Our experience of the life-giving power of the Spirit is certainly capable of fluctuation.

¹⁴ Lenski, 661.

¹⁵ See [Static Versus Dynamic Life](#) for our affirmation that a believer is subject to various forms of death as a result of moral failure.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis perceptively anticipated that Arminianism would reduce to a preservation based on perseverance in faith as a moral virtue. But his argument for moral security is answered in *Mere Christianity and Moral Christianity*.