

Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

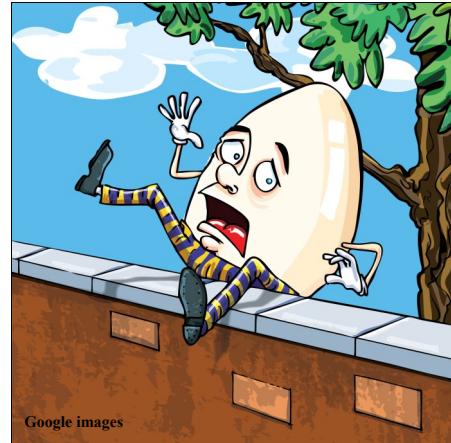
17: Apostasy

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
We all know this nursery rhyme though its meaning and origins have been lost way back in the mists of time. There is absolutely nothing in the lyrics to suggest that Humpty is an anthropomorphized egg but that's the way he is always represented to us. Please hold this image and this part of the rhyme in your mind because it is important.

We want to point out some very simple, basic truths about Humpty. In order to have 'had a great fall' as he did, he had to be sitting on a wall; we are clearly told that he was. Therefore he could not have simply appeared to be sitting on the wall but that that was illusory. Furthermore it is impossible to fall from a position, or situation, you do not have. Humpty could never have fallen off that wall if he never had sat on it. This is not a tortuous build-up to a bad joke - or even a bad yolk! - nor are we leading to a psychological assessment procedure for idiocy; there is a very serious religious issue at stake here and Humpty Dumpty helps resolve it.

Two examples from my family

It was 2009 when my aunty Nora (right) died, aged 95. She never married and I, being family, was to conduct her funeral. She had all-but been adopted into the lovely close family of her best friend, Marjorie, who had died a year or so earlier. Marjorie's family looked on



Nora as one of their own and had still shown amazing love and kindness to her as she slowly slipped away. Her niece's husband, Michael, was a church minister of the Open Brethren/Baptist type - I was never quite certain which, but definitely of the Protestant Evangelical variety. We discussed the funeral over the phone and right at the close of our conversation he remarked, "One thing we know is that Nora was saved: 'Once saved always saved'." I confess I simply didn't want a long, involved discussion of this belief right then and hoped we could talk later about it, so I let it slide by. Maybe I shouldn't have done so because we never did get the chance later.

I did not believe in this position one iota and quietly committed her body to the elements, 'earth to earth, dust to dust, and [left] her soul to God her Maker'. I doubt anybody noticed the missing words, 'in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead to life immortal', because I could not put my hand on my heart and believe that that was the truth about aunty Nora's ultimate, eternal fate. I believe she had apostatized, so I must not presume something different, just to please mourning sensibilities amongst her loved ones, and leave God alone to be her judge. She was my aunt; that's hard!

Nora was my mother's sister, the third child of five girls and one boy, in that order. They were raised faithfully in the church and all the girls were baptized. Three stuck with it, two did not and the boy never committed. They are all now dead.

Nora became a Sunday School teacher and seemed very committed until she got in with a crowd of friends, all of whom were fine, moral, good-living people in worldly terms but who gave no thought to Christ and the Gospel. They weaned her away from the church, spending lots of time hiking and hostelling at weekends. The hills were much more fun than listening to sermons and singing hymns. I never ever remember seeing Nora at a single service. She never declared that she did not believe any more. She never pretended that she did believe and then self-righteously said she praised God climbing Helvellyn and admiring His beautiful creation. She was too honest and candid for that and never postured to please people, not even her devout sister, my mother.

The Scriptures are quite clear; we must not neglect meeting together (Heb 10:25). That may seem like almost a throw away line in a broader argument in Hebrews but the Lord asked us to remember Him in taking the bread and drinking the cup, '*to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*', as Paul tells us in Corinthians (1 Co 11:26). It was a gentle request from the depths of love, not a harsh command, from the Saviour to those who love and serve Him so that they can honour His memory and, by so doing, let the world know about Him and His salvation, bought at such a price at Calvary.

Those who love Him can do no more than do as He asked. However there is a very positive admonition in Matthew: "...*everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*"' (Mt 10:32-33). Those who deliberately neglect meeting together to remember the Lord's death, and who resolutely refuse to acknowledge any sort of faith in Him before men, having once promised 'to serve Him to the end', as we sing, have chosen wilfully to turn their backs on Him and spurn His love. They should not be surprised if He refuses to acknowledge them before the Father on Judgement Day. If God will allow them in

to Heaven by His great grace, then I will gladly rejoice along with all other forgiven sinners, but for the time being my confidence in this happening is at a biblical zero.

The second family example is of my cousin Robert. He was also raised faithfully in the church and put on the Lord in baptism as a teenager. He went away to university and ended up with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology - not the best thing to study if you want to hold on to any sort of religious faith. He also drifted away from the church like so many. He died in 2014 and to my complete shock and disbelief, not only had he drifted away, as I rightly suspected, he had declared himself to be an atheist and wanted a secular, Humanistic funeral, which he got. I had absolutely no hint or idea of this. It is one thing to neglect the Lord and drift into religious apathy, as aunty Nora and so many do, but another thing entirely to renounce Jesus as Lord and declare that there actually is no God at all. This is not a position of careless neglect but rather one of careful thought and choice. If there is a faint flicker of hope for the drifters, there's minus zero hope for the once enlightened but now avowed atheists. Again this is hard because it hurts. It's my family.



Cousin Robert
(At Nora's funeral)

'Once saved, always saved'

There are millions of evangelical Christian believers who teach this doctrine. If you mix with Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and other shades of Protestant belief systems, indeed any that are solidly based in the doctrines of John Calvin, you will encounter it, for they all subscribe to it. Put quite simply, it's wrong! Many members of churches of Christ have drifted into some of these groups, especially those which practise the baptism of believers by immersion, 'because they are nearly the same as us', so it is thought. They're not, not when you scratch the surface and get down to the real basics of their faith systems.

Essentially what is believed is that once God

has given the penitent His grace and saved them they cannot ever be lost. They have a Scripture to cover this belief and at first sight it seems to be rock-solid. It's in John 10, so let us look at it.

Jesus was being questioned in the Temple about whether He was the Christ or not. *'The Jews gathered around him and said to him,*

"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (Jn 10:24-30, emphasis ours). So there it is as plain as the nose on your face. Once the Father has given a 'sheep' to the Shepherd (Jesus) no one can snatch him or her out of His hand - 'Once saved, always saved': check and check-mate.

This passage is picked up in the hymn 'Loving Shepherd of Thy sheep' where the last two lines of the opening verse are:

'Nothing can Thy power withstand,
None can pluck me from Thy hand.'

And we say, 'Amen' to that. It's a wonderful promise that if we remain faithful there is no power in the Universe, not even Satan himself, can pluck us from the Saviour's hand. We are saved and safe in the arms of Jesus. There is absolutely nothing in the hymn with which we could argue, or even want to argue.

What this doctrine seems to have forgotten, however, is that once we put on Christ we do not cease to be free agents. The Lord will wrap His lov-



Jesus knows His sheep

ing hands around us and all our enemies cannot touch us, but our own wilful choice mechanisms have not been suspended. We can choose to walk out of His hands if we so wish. He will not ward off our own deliberate actions prompted by nothing more than our own desires. Not every sin we commit is down to the direct action of the

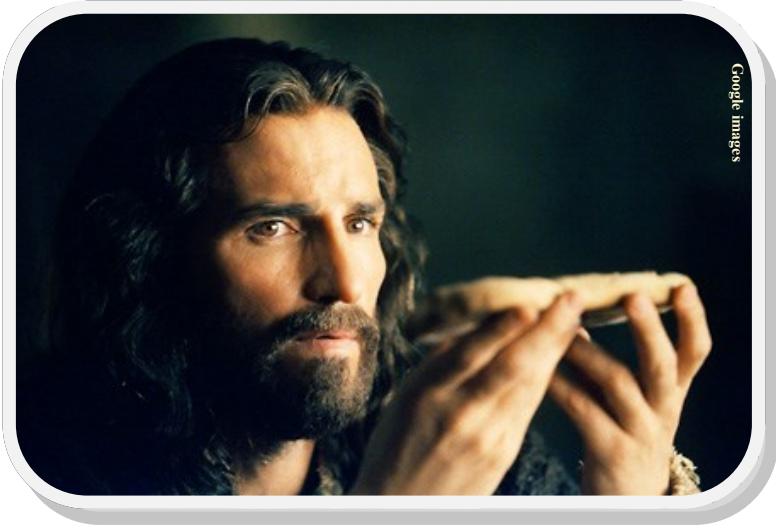
Devil and/or one of his angels; we are quite capable of sinning unaided all on our own (James 1:13-15). We still are responsible for our own actions. It might be nice to give such 'credit' to the 'Adversary', and no doubt he would claim it if we did (!) for he deals in lies, but we are quite able to reject the Lord all on our own.

How do they answer this?

When engaging in dialogue on most Christian subjects it is well to remember that arguments both ways have been bandied around for years and the chances of us finding an original one are very remote! If a person falls away, so the argument goes, and gives up on their once apparently professed faith, it is obvious that they were never saved in the first place. They may have gone through the actions which betoken saving belief, which produce the gift of grace from God, but this was illusory. They only 'appeared' to be saved. Thus the only way we can ever tell if a person actually was saved is when they remain faithful to the end and die in full profession of what they had always seemed to profess. Thus it is only actually at death that we can be absolutely certain that that person was indeed saved by the grace of God. Once He has given His free gift of grace He cannot withdraw it. It is impossible to fall from grace - so this teaching goes.

Enter Humpty Dumpty

With spiritual abstractions like this there is little you can do to counter them. If it all hinges on blind faith, then if you believe it, it becomes true for you,



Google images

This is My body

if not then it doesn't. The Roman Catholics can declare that during the mass, when the bell rings and the right words are said the bread and wine turn into the actual body and blood of Christ. They still taste like bread and wine, and a forensic test on them would confirm that nothing material has altered, so they are physically still bread and wine, but for the faithful they have mysteriously altered into a holy, spiritual form and logic has nothing to do with it. It becomes a matter of semantics that when Jesus said, "This is My body," as He held the bread, that He meant "This represents My body." The fact that He was not yet dead when He uttered those words might just be a clue. When He declared, "I am the door," He did not imply He had morphed into a piece of wood, no matter what His trade had been before He began His ministry. But it becomes a matter of faith as to how you handle these sayings. With the notion of 'falling from grace', and whether such a thing is possible, there is no such ambiguity for Scripture has pronounced on it.

One of the big issues in the formative years of the Christian faith was whether a person should first become a Jew before putting on Christ. For male converts this would mean being circumcised according to the Law of Moses and thereby putting them under its yoke, which Christ had freed us all from. Jewish converts frequently had difficulties with this when uncircumcised Gentiles accepted Christ. Also, as life became 'warmer' for Christians as the Roman Empire began to persecute them some former Jews thought that it might be a good idea to slip back into Judaism, because the Romans saw no threat from them and gave them a more peaceful,

substantially less threatened existence. So they were thinking that since they had salvation under the Old Law why not ditch the New faith and go back, remaining spiritually safe to where they once were. Paul was tackling this Judaising problem in the Galatian church as he penned these words: '*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.' (Gal 5:1-6, emphasis mine). So, any Gentile Christians who were thinking of opting into Judaism for a quiet life were told quite clearly that if they did so they would be falling away from grace. They would be tossing aside the great spiritual blessings they had in Christ.

To fall from grace they had to have been given grace in the first place. You cannot fall from a position you do not occupy. This great gift can indeed be lost after such a fall and it bears thinking about that just as 'all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again', so it looks likely that once a believer has lost his or her grace by apostatising, they too cannot be put back together again! Is this 'Once an apostate always an apostate'? This is a serious situation. Maybe my aunty Nora's almost dead faith could have been rekindled but my cousin Robert chose to put himself outside of the grace of God which once He had gladly accepted.

Warnings in Hebrews

This is not idle speculation. The Hebrew Letter tackles it face on, and so must we. Encouraging the brethren to move forward in their faith to a spiritual maturity, the Letter (or probably the sermon, for thus it appears to have been initially) continues: '*It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spir-*

it, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.’ (Heb 6:4-8).

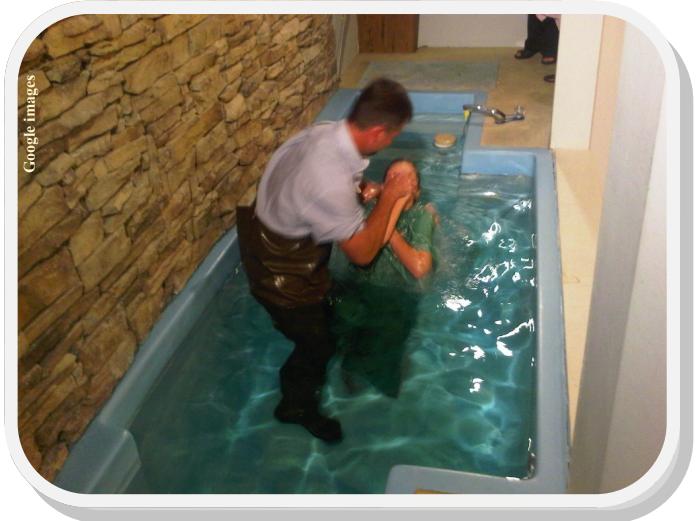
Those being referenced here are not believers who only appeared to have been saved by the grace of God, but rather they ‘have once been enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, have shared in the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.’ This is not a mirage faith; these believers received the Holy Spirit, as promised at baptism (Acts 2:38) and have walked under the care and in the arms of God. They were saved. Their falling away is tantamount to recrucifying the Son of God and holding Him up to contempt. Our Robert could not deny the existence of Jesus or that He died in agony on a Cross, but his denial of the very existence of God ‘said’ that Jesus was just a deluded, ordinary man and nothing more and that His death was meaningless and pointless. Just how contemptuous is that from one who once affirmed that Jesus was ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God?’ Christians who convert to Islam effectively ‘say’ that Mohammed, who died for nobody’s sins, is the true prophet and that Jesus was nothing more than a side-show on the pages of history. Apostatising is very serious indeed.

The end of the quotation from Hebrews 6 is that the end of the apostate is to be burned. There is only the one passage, in John’s Gospel, which seems to support the ‘Once saved always saved’ stance but there are nearly 200 passages warning about falling away and its dangers. If it was not a truth this would be astonishing, yet one passage is allowed to trump the vast majority. The Hebrew Letter comes back to the theme of dire warning against apostasy in chapter 10. *‘If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy*

on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.’ (Heb 10:26-31).

Once again we note the withdrawal of the blessings of the sacrifice for sin since the Holy Spirit has been offended and the blood of the covenant profaned. Henceforth the apostate is to be subjected to the vengeance of God. The Lord warned of whom to fear: *“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”* (Lk 12:4-5).

Injudicious baptisms



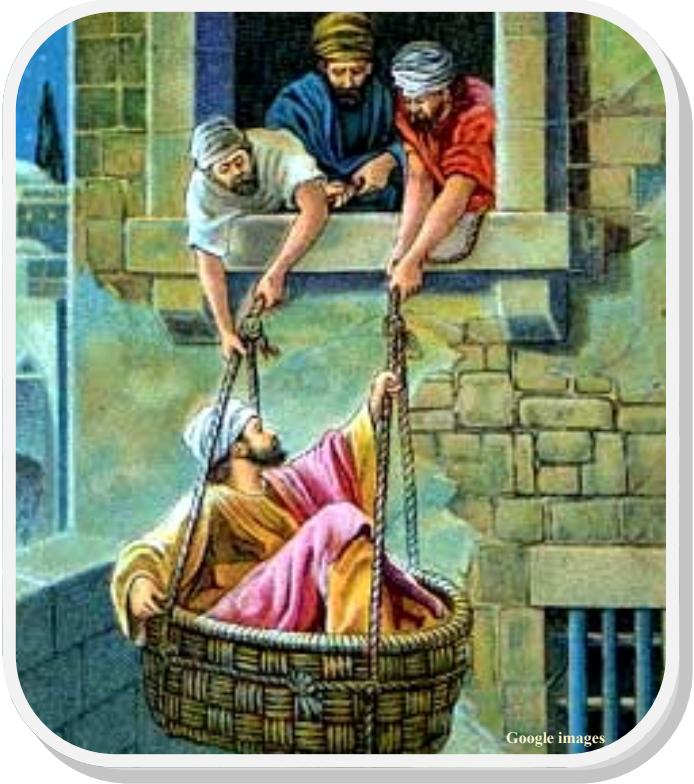
The urgent need to immerse a penitent as quickly as is humanly possible is an almost ubiquitous spiritual reflex amongst our brethren in churches of Christ. It is understandable because baptism (immersion) is the door through which repentant believers pass, after confessing their faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ, to be added to the church and receive the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). There is biblical precedence for speed. The 3000 Jews who heard the very first Gospel address on the Day of Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch out in the desert (Acts 8), and the

gaoler and his family at Philippi (Acts 16) are obvious examples. But such haste is not always wise, in fact I would go so far as to say that generally speaking today, in our social climate, it is most unwise! We are forgetting the example of Saul of Tarsus who spent three miserable days, without sight, neither eating nor drinking and coming to terms with what he now knew to be the truth, that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah and that he had been persecuting His followers. The Lord called in Ananias, who was understandably reluctant to go to Saul, and told him. “*Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” (Ac 9:15-16). Saul/Paul was busy counting the cost, in suffering, of serving the Lord.

We know what his reply was but just look at what a cost that was to be. Writing to Corinth he was defending his ministry against some who were opposing him. So, almost in desperation, he points out to them what it cost him to be an apostle and bring them the good news. *‘I am talking like a madman—with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?’*

‘If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.’ (2 Co 11:23-33).

That is some list of the cost Paul had to weigh up before saying ‘Yes’ to serving the Lord as he



Paul escapes from Damascus

did. And make no mistake about it, he could have counted the cost and declined the Lord’s kind offer! How many of us would accept a deal like that? Obviously we are not going to be called to that level of service but there still is a cost which we must consider. Too frequently, in the well-meaning rush to seal the salvation of a soul, we push the deal to its completion without letting the weight of the commitment being made sink in. The baptism then is an unbalanced emotional response which can easily come to be regretted in the cold light of another day, but it’s then too late to back out.

I once read a report of a ‘conversion’ which absolutely appalled me. A Gospel campaign brought a young man in from the world and he had many questions long after the sermon was over and most of the congregation had departed. It was the evangelist for the congregation, not the imported preacher, who handled the situation and slowly the hours crept by, through midnight and on to 2 o’clock in the morning when the young man finally cracked and agreed to be baptized. He was immersed immediately, the baptistry being ready during the campaign, after two in the morning, tired, exhausted, emotionally battered into submission and completely vulnerable. This wasn’t a conversion; it was brainwashing. The anxieties placed on

evangelists in this country who are supported from abroad to show their worth by their baptismal returns puts them under unfair pressures too which can result in situations like this. We are not saying that we should do as the Baptists do and save up baptismal requests over months and perform them when there are sufficient candidates to warrant the effort. However, giving such a person time over several days to go away and think carefully about what will be happening if the baptism goes ahead, and thereby count whatever cost might be involved for them, would be spiritually prudent. It would also be very wise for their ultimate salvation for acceptance would be balanced out in the cold light of day and the possibility of apostasy diminished by a significant factor.

Taking a vow and breaking it leaves the individual far worse off than not taking one at all. If the Holy Spirit is spurned and Christ held to ridicule the door of true conversion is slammed shut by apostasy. If no vow is taken the door remains open for the Holy Spirit to find a way into that heart at a later date and thus effect a real, genuine and full salvation. We are dealing with souls and eternal destinies as we encourage people to follow Christ. It is very serious spiritual business not to be taken lightly or flippantly. This is the main reason why I am very uneasy about making a show of a baptism and turning it into a spectacle with cameras capturing the event. By all means capture the happiness afterwards, but what is being done in the baptismal waters is so awesome, sacred and solemn that trite distractions, done with the very best of intentions, fo-

cus the mind on ephemeral things rather than its spiritual depths. (*This is only a personal opinion.* I do not like intrusive cameras when couples are taking their marriage vows either. They too are ultra sacred moments of deep commitment before a holy God. We are allowed to have opinions, which can differ, and not fall out over it. That's a freedom we receive in some situations from being in Christ.)

Conclusion

Apostasy is real, serious and eternally significant. Jesus knew it would happen - He told the parable of the Sower to point out its reality. The Bible is replete with warnings about the dangers of not remaining steadfast. Sadly it will be the personal experience of just about every Christian to know many who once named Jesus as Lord and who put Him on in baptism and used to sing 'O Jesus I have promised to serve Thee to the end,' who have wandered off and denied Him. Many will have seen this happen in their own families, especially if their families have a long tradition of faithfulness in the church. That is why I have chosen to give very personal examples in this study because we are all affected by it. It hurts because we love them. You can substitute your own examples and relate to them as I do to those I love or loved.

'Once saved, always saved'? No. Jesus has every right to expect to be followed to the end, not accepted briefly and then ignored over a lifetime. This is a doctrine which must be resisted for it is mistaken.

Tasks

How do you personally tackle the emotional and spiritual dilemma of those close to you as family and friends who have obviously apostatized?

What do you think about the notion that unless exceptional circumstances 'demand' it, a penitent believer should be given a 'cooling-off period to reconsider such a serious spiritual decision as being baptized?