



## Biblical Principles

# Falling Away From Faith — 1

by Chuck Gianotti

*Studies in 1 Timothy—part 9a*

Nothing is more painful to elders than a believer falling away from the faith. This is the most serious thing that can happen to a Christian. The apostle Paul anticipates and warns young Timothy about this problem in 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

### The issue: Faith

Paul's concern in this passage is not with church attendance, right living or the like (good as those things are). The core issue is that of faith: where once a person walked by faith, now he walks by sight. Now this falling away, as Paul terms it, is easy to see in the "large" sins of life. But it begins in the "small" things of the Christian life. For example, James says,

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.'" (Ja 4:13-15 NASB).

This simple faith is not really small, though, is it? We are speaking of faith at its most basic level. We should have a growing belief that our daily steps are subject to God's overriding sovereignty. We are not talking about glibly tacking on the phrase, "If the Lord wills" to every statement of planning. Rather it is the attitude of faith exemplified by that phrase. We should be walking in the trust that God will guide our plans according to His goodness and purposes. It shows in how we talk about our planning for the future.

While we need to be careful about judging by only words, people's speech reveal much about their thoughts and attitudes. Are they using words that reveal an attitude of trust in our sovereign God or does their talk reflect lip-service to God that simply sugar coats an otherwise secular attitude.

Too often we easily get caught up in ensuring outward conformity to the accepted Christian behaviors, as dictated by our particular circle of believers. At the core, the essential thing is the attitude of faith—all else will flow from that.

### The fact: Some will fall away

God is telling us the facts in the passage: some will fall away. Of course this is not desirable, but it *will* happen. We don't need

to be paranoid or defeatist in our outlook, but we need to be alert! The warning is given in the passage so we will do something about it. Paul strongly challenges the Ephesian elders, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers..." (Acts 20:28). Some translations put it this way, "Watch out for yourselves and the flock of God..."

### The challenge: Watchfulness or Paranoia?

Now it takes wisdom to walk the fine line between paranoia and watchfulness. In all Christian groups there arises a culture of behaviors that are accepted. Most of these behaviors are founded on good applications of the Word of God in our lives and we encourage them in others. However, some of these things are simply applications of the truth, and may be subject to our own experiences, feelings and personal convictions. When these applications get challenged, we can easily become disturbed and "pound the pulpit harder" to force conformity.

As a young believer I remember elders that seemed to worry about every "little" thing the young people did that was slightly outside the comfort zone of the older Christians. It often came across as pressure to "conform" and was easily interpreted as "legalism." The slippery slope argument (that this thing was not bad in itself but could lead down the slippery slope to sin) would quash any creativity or freedom in Christ we had, it seemed.

For some of those things, I am now thankful for the warning of mature Christians. For others, in retrospect, I still feel they were mistaken—and some young believers were unnecessarily pushed away because of this. Even sister churches can pressure each other to conform in many areas where Scripture has not explicitly made something clear.

I wasn't mature enough in my faith then to discern that fine line between paranoia and watchfulness. Now that I am older, I pray for the wisdom to allow the Spirit to move in others differently than what I am used to. Yet at the same time, I desire to be watchful for any movement that would lead people away from a walk of faith based on the truth of the Word of God. This takes maturity, wisdom and humility. At the heart is the issue of faith. Am I encouraging faith or conformity—there is a big difference.

*For Paul's specific warnings, see part 2 of this article on page 3.*



# Leadership Principles

## Small & Struggling Assemblies

by Jack Spender

When you have a healthy congregation, some young families and children, then training more elders or adding some fellowship groups seems a logical next step. But what about small, struggling assemblies that have been in decline for years? Is there hope to grow again or would it be better to just disband?

The bottom line answer is: Yes! The Lord is faithful and miracles still do happen. But the cost may be high in the loving efforts of His people and the willingness to part with some traditions that may have outlived their usefulness.

### 1. We need to be honest about where we are and how we got there.

This is not a call to morbid introspection and dwelling on past failures. But an honest humility is the right place to start, as the Lord promises to revive the spirit and the heart of those who are humble (Is. 57:15). Perhaps there has been a lack of pastoral care or shallow ministry of the Word. It can be instructive to take note of the things which sounded so promising and were tried but simply haven't worked. I would avoid listing things that may be only superficial factors like "the neighborhood of our chapel has changed."

### 2. Be wary of quick fixes.

It took years for the church to come to this point and things won't be repaired overnight. Some answers sound spiritual: "Keep your eyes on the Lord" and "Prayer is the answer." True, but in most of the small, struggling congregations I have known, there are wonderful prayer warriors who have remained cheerful through years of discouragement just by keeping their eyes on the Lord. These and other spiritual maxims have a place in a healthy Christian church, but the real problem usually has an intensely practical side to it.

Consider for example that well known passage in Revelation 2:1-7 in which the Lord rebukes the Ephesus church for losing their first love. What counsel does He give them? "Repent and do the first works." Not "Pray," or "Sing of your love for Christ," but "Repent and do the works you did at the first."

### 3. Consider what the real needs are.

In seeking to encourage one small,

struggling assembly recently, I asked them to think about the following point. If those people who visit you occasionally (neighbors, family members, acquaintances) were asked to make a list of the things that would be most important to them in a church fellowship, how would it read? Remember, the list is not about what you would want nor even what you think the Lord requires. Nor is it judged by whether those people are saved or lost. This is an exercise in looking at the church through the eyes of people who are outsiders and need to know the Lord better than they do now.

An objection may arise in the minds of some readers. "Brother, don't you know about those 'seeker-sensitive churches' that build the church around what the neighbors want, with lots of entertainment and watered-down sermons?" Yes, I do know and those things are surely not the answer we seek. But let's be like Paul who rejoiced whenever the message of God's love was proclaimed (Phil. 1:18), rather than the Pharisees who found fault with anything that was not centered about themselves.

Back to our list—what would be on it? To be realistic, it probably wouldn't start with the "breaking of bread," or "solid Bible study." A clear presentation of the gospel? Nope, none of those. Probably the top item would be: "A family that loves me and accepts me for who I am." Interesting, because that would probably top the list of another group of people: those fringe believers or "pew warmers" who come to meetings but never get involved.

So here is the next question: without compromising our convictions can we build a more loving, accepting family spirit into our Sunday routine? Maybe we can. Not by adding more time to the meeting schedule but by making better use of the time we already have.

### 4. Take a hard look at priorities.

We have now come to the heart of the matter. Before we can equip the saints or win the lost for Christ we must show them that we care for them as people just as the Lord did. How about taking advantage of the intimacy that our small size affords and creating a family atmosphere right in the Sunday morning schedule, say, after the breaking of

bread? The requirements to get started are modest: some tables and chairs and 20 or 30 minutes of time. Someone will need to provide leadership. An elder with a smile and a winsome spirit would be a good choice. "Pick up your coffee and pull up a chair for a few minutes!"

If you're wondering where that 20 or 30 minutes can come from, here are some questions to help:

- Is the breaking of bread the right length of time for your group? When you had 200 people, a full hour was needed. But is that still the case? Do a few participate repeatedly to fill up the hour?

- For assemblies with adult classes, are two teaching meetings really needed?

Both wisdom & courage are needed to discern between principle & tradition!

### 5. Making it work.

One major challenge will be to change our way of thinking about the folks sitting around the table. We must not view our visitors or fringe believers as people who could help us grow. Also, we must resist the temptation to divide them into the "saved" and the "lost" and then treat them differently. Instead, adopt this mindset: all present are needy; each one needs to draw closer to the Lord. Christ's love is irresistible and can open the way for His Word to do its work in hearts.

The options for starting conversations are limitless.

-Does everyone present know everyone else? Especially the children? Where do they go to school? What do they like to do in their free time?

-Who has a prayer request? Is anyone witnessing to a friend? Who saw God work in a special way this week?

-Does anybody have a question or suggestion for the elders? Who can repeat a memory verse? Are there sick people we should be praying for? Who is corresponding with a missionary family and has some news?

Be brief, keep it moving, don't be preachy, try to involve the young people present. Whenever a need is mentioned, stop right there and see what can be done in a practical way to help. Don't hesitate to use some of the Lord's resources to enable ideas to become reality.

Faithfully pursued, a family time of love and care can bring life to a small, struggling assembly.



*Studies in 1 Timothy—part 9b (see page one for part 9a)*

**P**aul, inspired by the Spirit lays out six causes for falling away from the faith that we need to watch for:

### Listening to false thinking

*“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons...”* (1 Timothy 4:1b NASB). By “listening” he means embracing false teachings as true. Elders need to be aware of what the people in our congregations are reading and listening to. Who are they quoting in their Bible lessons and conversations? How are they being influenced by what they hear?

We are warned in 2 Cor 11:14 that even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. To be sure, believers need to be aware of false teachings in the world and some need to study false teachings and philosophies of the world so as to help the rest of us know how to refute them. But not every Christian can do this kind of study without being infected by the deception. So elders, be on guard for the flock!

### Repeated sin

*“... by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron ...”* (1 Tim 4:2). We need to watch out for people falling into habitual sin, sin that is ignored or justified as being a reasonable concession to the difficulties of life. For example, greed in the form of career ambition, temper in the guise of “righteous indignation,” inability to control one’s appetite under the cloak of “oh well, everything else in my Christian walk is going well”—are habitual sins but in reality are examples of lack of faith.

Doesn’t God say, “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness...” (2 Peter 1:3)? Repeated sin leads us to believe that we don’t need God’s power in our lives. This leads to a dull conscience which can grow like a cancer and affect other areas of our conscience. Eventually this unbelief extends to other areas of the Christian walk and may end up in falling from faith.

### Rules-oriented lifestyle

*“... men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created ...”* (1 Tim 4:3). A life lived according to rigid rules is a step

away from faith. Paul warns elsewhere about decrees such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (Col 2:21) and, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:23). In short, being legalistic, though it *looks* spiritual, may lead to falling away from faith.

Now again, wisdom is needed to discern between valid disciplines for Christians as opposed to rigid, legalistic practices. Disciplining one’s self is encouraged in Scripture. However, the line is drawn when a discipline is practiced as “law” that *requires* conformity, and guilt is the primary motivation. That is not how God intends our relationship with Him to be. Such living ceases being a sacrifice of love and lacks God’s approval.

The evidences of legalistic living are obvious: a) someone begins to pressure others to conform to his choices of self-discipline or b) someone feels guilty when he doesn’t live up to another’s standards. As elders, we need to watch out for legalistic living, because it can lead to falling away from faith.

### Absence of gratefulness

*“... foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude...”* (4:3b-4). The importance of gratefulness in the Christian’s walk can not be overstated. Paul emphasized in Romans 1:21 that lack of thankfulness is an early step away from God. As elders, we need to ask, “Are people in our congregation expressing true gratitude to God for what He provides for us, or is there a movement in some to avoid all enjoyments of life.” Is there a sense of real thankfulness at the Lord’s Supper or are the prayers lifeless and rote? Do people sing songs of thanksgiving with enthusiasm? Gratitude prevents an attitude of entitlement, where a person feels he deserves more than he has. Gratitude prevents greed, envy, stealing, criticism, etc. One of the best ways to encourage gratefulness in others is to live gratefully ourselves.

### Minimizing the Word

*“... for it is sanctified by means of the word of God”* (5a). Is there a love of God’s Word in people’s lives. It is through an accurate knowledge of God’s communication that people are set free to live life out of gratitude, and not out of guilty obligation. We should always be on the lookout for people who minimize the Word of God in their lives, because that means they are trusting other sources for wisdom and guidance in life, things that do not require faith in our Lord for daily living—and this can lead to a falling away from faith as they look to other sources for truth and wisdom.

### Lack of meaningful prayer

*“... and prayer”* (4:5b). Prayer is probably the most difficult thing to do consistently and teaching on this subject probably generates the most guilt and discouragement. Unless we are going to contradict what we have said earlier in this article, prayer cannot be treated as legalism or a blind obligation. This is talking about the expression from our hearts to God, acknowledging His goodness towards us. It is an unshakeable belief that God is “for” us, not against us. Prayer is our communication with the Father who loves us and wants to have a dynamic, life-giving relationship with us. Yet so many Christians devolve into a ritualistic life of “going through the motions” but denying the life behind the outward movements. Diminishing prayer life can lead to falling away from faith. So we elders need to encourage prayer, without being legalistic. This comes best as the elders pray spontaneously and with sincere passion for engaging God.

### Conclusion

The step away from faith is rooted in a life that finds no joy in communing with Christ. The overall question that comes from this study for both the people in our congregations and for us elders is, “Am I enjoying the Lord?” I know a woman who often uses that exact phrase, “I really enjoyed the Lord” when speaking of attending the Lord’s Supper or having devotional times during the week. Isn’t that really what God desires as well—our enjoyment of Him? Any movement away from this is a step away from faith. Elders need to stand guard against these six causes of falling away from the faith. 

## Wives' Corner

# Much Charity

by Mary Gianotti

In the play "The Perfect Husband," by Oscar Wilde, Lady Chilton considers her husband flawless and loves him for his perfection. Unbeknownst to her he is flawed, he has kept his secret from her for years. As the story unfolds the truth begins to dawn on Lady Chilton. A close friend, Lord Goring, counsels her with these words, "Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing, nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing."

At times I think I am like Lady Chilton. I love people based on how they perform. If a person in my fellowship is doing and saying all the right things, then my affection for them grows. As soon as an angry word is spoken, a meeting skipped for no reason or I discover they have seen a movie I would not go to, I can grow cold in my love.

The apostles must have been aware of this tendency among Christians. Read the following verses and meditate on the kind of love we are to have for all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Peter writes, "The end of all things is near ... above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."<sup>1</sup>

James speaks out against favoritism when he writes, "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>2</sup> He warns, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds (*of love*) is dead."<sup>3</sup>

John says, "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another."<sup>4</sup> "Any one who does not love remains in death."<sup>5</sup> "Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another."<sup>6</sup> "We should lay our lives down

for our brothers."<sup>7</sup> "Whoever loves God must love his brothers."<sup>8</sup> (emphasis mine)

Peter, James and John knew our Lord intimately. They had experienced perfect love in action as they followed Jesus. Years later each observed the lack of this kind of love among the Christians. Let's fast forward a couple thousand years. Is it any different today? Making it even more personal, do you love everyone in your fellowship? Do you love them deeply from the heart? What about that one woman who can really get under your skin with a few words or a look? These are tough questions. One thing I know is that when my attitude is one of superiority, loving deeply from the heart is impossible.

Lord Goring's words are true. We are all capable of doing foolish and wrong things. Somehow we tend to forget this when we observe the faults in others. We forget that we, too, are sinners continually in need of God's love. In the play, Lady Chilton replies, "Are you a pessimist, Lord Goring?" His answer is profound. "No Lady Chilton, all I know is that life cannot be understood without much charity (*love*), it can not be lived without much charity (*love*)."

It is also true that the Christian life can not be understood or lived "without much charity."

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 4:7-8 NIV

<sup>2</sup> James 2:8

<sup>3</sup> James 2:26 parenthesis added

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:13b

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:11

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 3:16

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:2

## Discussion Questions

This issue contains two articles warning about those who will fall away from faith. But, just knowing about this possibility doesn't help. This warning needs to be followed by a strategy for doing something about it. The warning implies there is something that should be done to minimize the danger.

One practical suggestion would be to follow the lead of some readers of ESN who have used ShopNotes articles for discussion starters at elder retreats or during elders' meetings. In light of this idea, here are some discussion questions that you may find helpful to bring home some of the teaching in this 1 Timothy series:

1. Which of the six warning signs that lead to falling away from faith do you see currently happening in your local church?

2. How can elders encourage more prayer without being legalistic?

3. What are the barriers to having accountability so that repeated sin doesn't become characteristic of your fellowship? What can be done to overcome them?

4. What are some of the main hindrances to people reading the Word on a regular basis? What can be done to help them overcome barriers?

5. Are there any good personal disciplines of the Christian life that you have adopted, but that others haven't? How does this make you feel?

6. What are some creative ideas for how the elders can foster more gratitude in the church? For example, would a "gratitude" bulletin board work in your assembly, where people can pin up brief notes of "Thanks" for someone's ministry or acts of service?

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"... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight ...voluntarily ... with eagerness ..." (1 Peter 5:2 NASB)