

In religion the same progress is apparent. Repentance itself is a ceasing to do evil and a learning to do well. Men grow in virtue and in vice. Faith, hope, and love are progressive. Habit is the offspring of repeated and progressive acts. No man becomes a profligate in a day, nor is the Christian character attained by a few efforts. Hence the means of moral life, health, and perfection, are as abundant and as necessary as the means of animal and vegetable life and growth.

Christians may grow in favour, in moral courage, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and universal good will, as they grow in stature. But this growth is not attained by wishing, but by abounding in the work of faith, the labour of love, and in the patience of hope.

Apostacy is not the work of a moment—it is not an instantaneous change. As, in ascending a lofty eminence, so in descending, we make but one step at a time. He that is condemned to death for taking away the life of his fellow man, in retracing his steps can often discover the first covetous thought or revengeful feeling in the long progress of crime which terminated in the most enormous of all acts of wickedness against his brother man. Thoughts precede words, and both generally precede actions. Murder, adultery, theft, and every immoral or unrighteous act, first exist in thought: “Lust when it has conceived brings forth sin, and sin when it is perfected brings forth death.” He that hates his brother is a murderer, because murder is found in the fruits which grow from hatred.

The numerous cautions found in the New Testament intimate the danger of apostacy. Where there is no danger no caution is necessary; but cautions always denote danger. “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.” We have sometimes marked the course of apostates, and heard the mournful narratives of others who have made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience. Sometimes the mournful tale begins with, “I did not as constantly read the good Book as I had been accustomed to do. Then I did not find so much delight in secret prayer as I found before. Occasionally a day has passed without ever meditating on any of the communications of God to man, and without calling upon the name of the Lord. This led to a greater remissness in other duties. I did not guard my lips nor keep my heart as formerly. I repented and reformed; but found it more easy to become remiss a second time than before. I used to meet thrice every Lord’s Day with the brethren. But, after having once or twice fallen off from my former zeal and devotion, I made twice a-day suffice. A little indisposition, a head-ache, or some slight domestic inconvenience, soon become a good excuse for going but once on the Lord’s Day to unite with the brethren in the praises of the Lord. But my interest in the disciples began to diminish as my zeal began to cool. I could now see more flaws in