

Why do good men fail?

Introduction

I was recently asked why so many good, apparently genuine, believers (and especially leaders) could fall into such serious errors as modern Charismaticism,¹ which is so obviously radically unorthodox. This question has puzzled many godly Christians for years.

I am less surprised by this; but that may be because experience has given me a more cynical view about men than most; I am naturally a maverick demanding proof for everything. But the question deserves some investigation, as it is a recurring theme in history.

Edward Irving [1792-1834] would be a classic example of this. A Scotsman zealous for God, gifted in preaching; a man who could stir the emotions and stimulate faith. A man friends with some of the brightest minds of the age [Carlyle, Coleridge, Drummond etc.]. A man so popular a church had to be built for him in London. Yet he ends up preaching Christological heresy, wacky ideas about prophecy and eschatology,² and speaking in tongues in public worship. He is deposed by his denomination; then entrapped, as a mere deacon, in the Catholic Apostolic Church - a proto-charismatic sect run by authoritarian apostles and prophets, where he is dominated by heretics; and dies in ignominy in a scandalised abusive assembly.

How do men rise to gifted heights in service to God, only to fall into error and scandal? I will examine this in this paper.

The example of OT kings

The Bible provides illustrations and commentary on all the things that we witness in history. For everything that occurs, there is a Biblical example somewhere that gives light to the situation.

In this matter we see the example of the kings of Judah (not Israel – who were all bad). After the Divided Monarchy, Israel completely collapsed into idolatry and rebellion but Judah initially had some good kings, interspersed by bad ones. Some of these did a superlative amount of good and had huge political success under God's blessing. The problem was that they all fell apart in later life and inexplicably descended into idolatry, pride and sin. Some evil idolatrous kings were sons of faithful obedient kings.

How could Jehoshaphat go from godliness, cleansing the land of idolatry, to military alliances with godless kings of Israel, which was his undoing? How could his son Jehoram, despite the example of his father, fall immediately into gross idolatry and bring ruin to Judah (his evil wife may have something to do with it)? How could Joash (Jehoash) go

¹ Charismaticism changed over the decades. It was originally a baptism in the Spirit seeking to make believers more spirit-filled and focused on God. Non-Charismatics could align with this by avoiding the second blessing dogma and centre on being filled with the Spirit. But Charismaticism changed from this gradually to include serious heresies and aberrational practices. These include: authoritarian apostles and prophets, mysticism, aberrant demonic behaviour pretending to be from God, occultism of all sorts (including necrophilia, divination, spiritualism and magic) and a world dominating agenda.

² His church was the origin point for Pre-Tribulation Dispensationalism.

from following the High Priest Jehoiada and fervently obeying God to disobeying God and allowing the land to fall into idolatry when Jehoiada died? He even killed the son of Jehoiada, Zechariah. How did Uzziah go from supervising the most prosperous time for Judah since the days of Jehoshaphat due to his faithfulness to God, and defeating the Philistines, to usurping the priest's office and burning incense on the golden altar of incense leading to him being struck with leprosy?

Hezekiah was obedient to the Lord. He cleansed the temple and set the priests and Levites in order. He garnered produce to feed the Levites and restored the sacrifices, involving not only Judah but also parts of Samaria. He built up Judah's defences and prayed when Sennacherib raised an invincible Assyrian army against him. God miraculously destroyed this army and put fear in the surrounding nations. Thus Hezekiah and Judah prospered. Yet Hezekiah fell into the sin of pride later in his reign and failed. Then his son Manasseh became one of Judah's worst kings before his repentance.

In the United Monarchy we have to question how it was that Saul, popular with the people, chosen by God, ordained by Samuel and initially successful in defeating Israel's enemies, could fall apart so seriously. He not only rebels against God in multiple ways (disobedience, consulting a witch) but he physically attacks God's chosen successor, David, who was actually trying to help him. He dies in the greatest ignominy by suicide.

On the other hand, David is a 'ruddy youth', inexperienced in war or politics, in fact more used to isolation on the hills shepherding sheep. Yet he goes on to becoming a hugely successful warrior king greatly enlarging Israel's borders to its extremities and defeating every enemy. He became one of history's greatest kings. Yet even he falls into serious sins later in life and goes against God bringing a plague on the nation for killing the Hittite Uriah and stealing his wife.

Some of the lessons from this history show that the reasons for falling include:

- Following the influence of an idolatrous wife.
- Following the influences of wicked counsellors.
- Trusting in men rather than God (e.g. foreign alliances trusting kings).
- Acting without consulting the Lord.
- Fear.
- Pride.
- Idolatry.

Lessons to learn

If we observe carefully, we see that there are many reasons why initially good people fail.

Total depravity

The most important factor to observe is the depravity of man. This Biblical doctrine undergirds many things³ and failing to understand this leads to many problems. Even the believer in Jesus Christ has to continually fight the old nature in a continuing progressive sanctification to separate the soul from temptation. The moment that a man presumes he has won this battle for good, he is doomed to completely fall. Thus all the doctrinal movements downplaying total depravity (e.g. Holiness Movement, Perfectionism, Higher Life Movement) lead to serious heresy and sin. We are all mere sinners that are totally dependent upon God every day for everything.

³ Such as doctrinal errors on salvation like Pelagianism or Arminianism.

It is common that good men fall into errors and practical mistakes because they subscribed to antinomian views. Some even stated that a Christian is never guilty at any time (serious antinomianism). A fall from grace is around the corner when a man says that.

Total depravity means that any Christian that fails to walk by faith and obeying the commandments of Christ will fall into sin and error.

Independence

An independent spirit is the utmost danger to a believer.

Perseverance is guaranteed, on the one hand, by God but, on the other hand, needs to be strived for daily. We run the race for the prize (1 Cor 9:24-25). We subdue our body (1 Cor 9:26-27). We press on towards the goal (Phil 3:14). We fight the good fight (2 Tim 4:7). We run the race (Heb 12:1). We endure temptation (Jm 1:12). We beware of an evil heart (Heb 3:12). We pursue righteousness (2 Tim 2:22). We fear to come short (Heb 4:1). We are diligent to enter God's rest (Heb 4:11). The ones striving for true holiness are the ones that are elect and ensured of perseverance.⁴ Obeying Christ's commandments is a fruit of true regeneration.

When we are soulishly confident in our standing and begin to have an independent spirit, then we fall. True believers have faith in the salvation that God has provided but also rest in him, trust in him and are utterly dependent upon him, striving to be obedient. We live by faith and that faith is dependent upon God.

The foundational position of the saint is to always know that you are a sinner saved by grace. You were rebellious dust that God had mercy on. Leaders that boast in their victory are on precarious ground.

Sadly many leaders have so emphasised the victory of faith that they became independent in their heart. They trusted in doctrine but not in God.

Disqualification

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified [*adokimos*].
1 Cor 9:27

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you are disqualified [*adokimos*]. 2 Cor 13:5

Adokimos: rejected, not standing the test, not approved: properly used of metals and coins; that which does not prove itself such as it ought; unfit for, unproved, spurious, reprobate.

This is a difficult subject to understand. One thing we cannot do is twist the meaning of the word 'disqualified' to mean something less than it is; which is what many commentaries do. It means failing the test (of faith). Neither can we say, with Arminian commentators, that it means that true believers can fall from grace and go to hell. It does not mean that.

⁴ Striving (i.e. obeying Christ's commandments) in the Adamic fleshly nature to be holy is legalism or Pelagianism and will fail. Presuming that you are holy because of a faulty doctrinal view and not striving at all, is Antinomianism and will fail. Being elect and assured of perseverance always leads to striving after holiness as a fruit.

What it means is what I have been saying. True believers take nothing for granted; they strive for holiness and discipline their body. They have faith in God and because of that faith they are dependent upon God and fight the good fight. Their union with Jesus ensures that they strive and press forward in faith. It is the opposite of Antinomian complacency.

Paul had no fear in being disqualified; he knew he had a crown waiting (2 Tim 4:8); in fact he explained the perseverance of the saints. Yet when it came to personal discipline, he subdued his body and strived as if he could be disqualified. For Paul, disqualified means failing to get the prize of faithful service – not failing to enter the race at all. He is referring here to failing to get the reward through lack of discipline (cf. Matt 10:42; 2 Jn 1:8).

Yet some churchgoers are disqualified. These are the ones that do not know that Jesus is in them. They are not in the faith.

Pride

In many cases the reason for failing was pride. It was pride that led David to number the people against God's law.

What tended to happen was that as a king trusted God, he defeated his enemies, brought security to the land and prosperity followed. During the time of peace and security the king, no longer busy in serious pursuits, became less careful, less faithful and fell into idolatry or some other evil. Pride was waiting for its time to strike and peace was when a king was vulnerable.

I have seen apparently good church leaders preach against pride while at the same time were succumbing to it. It is a subtle temptation. Often authoritarian leaders convinced themselves that they were serving the interests of God in acting like despots when actually they were just acting like despots.

What is important is following Biblical principles. These templates stop us from falling into pride, error and deception. When men are outside of those templates then all sorts of errors easily appear. When a church leader has built a church based on human, worldly principles and not Biblical precedents, then it is easy to fall into pride because he can convince himself that this or that strategy is serving God's purpose – when the whole strategy is opposed to a Biblical principle in the first place.

For example: a leader builds a large church meeting in a paid-for dedicated building established on a hierarchical system of leadership and centred upon loud, modern music-led worship. He started this work to glorify God; but he is already far from God's word by adopting forms that are all unbiblical. It is a short step from there to establishing dominant authoritarianism and building a cult. The adoption of worldly systems easily led to falling into pride and then serious error.

The principles ignored were;

- No dedicated church building wasting God's money but meeting in a home.
- Congregations are small and local.
- The church meets as a family; a small community.
- No leadership hierarchy; there is only a team of equal elders.
- There is no single authoritarian leader.
- There are no musical instruments allowed in worship.

Deception

This is probably the greatest threat. If you study the NT carefully, you will see that a huge amount of teaching is based on avoiding deception.

Now the only way to avoid deception is to be faithful to God's word and be filled with the Spirit (who illuminates that word).

The people who serve God must be focused upon studying God's word and applying it to themselves all the time. The word must test everything they do. Only then can such people be trusted to lead a work of God faithfully.

There are multiple temptations to hinder such a focus on God's word today. These include:

- The threat of being legalistic.
- The threat of being merely intellectual or dogmatic.
- Temptation to trust some other authority, such as a fake prophecy or the word of some leader (apostle).
- Being bound by some erroneous system of dogma, such as a poor catechism, creed or confession.
- Looking to men.

Deception is falling aside, falling away. It is falling from God's word and his grace. This falling away can be enticed by many means, which is why the NT has so many words that can be translated as 'deception'.⁵ The opposite of deception is not falling aside; being focused on God's word and walking a straight path.

The reason for falling away is often because you are looking at the wrong thing. A farmer ploughing a field has to focus on a single object straight in front of him. He must not look to the left or right but straight ahead. Only then will his furrows be straight. Similarly, a Christian must constantly look to Christ to ensure that he is walking in a straight path.

The problem is that men often look to something else thinking that they are serving God: looking at the work they are involved with; looking at their goals and objectives in the work; looking at the problems in that work and trying to find solutions; looking for power; looking for fame etc. They convince themselves that they are serving God but they are really serving themselves in building a great work.

The greatest deception lies in those things which tempt a man to think that he is serving God by following this or that erroneous scheme. The man failed to follow God, who never instructed him to follow those schemes; they arose from other men. But because the schemes had Biblical names, or arose from men claiming to be of God, or claimed to serve God's people, or claimed to provide a better testimony for God, they were accepted.

There are myriad temptations to deception to hinder a work of God or bring a leader down. They are individually tailored to each person by demons with centuries of experience in deceit. Men must be constantly aware of the danger of deception and be vigilant in combating it or they will fall under it.

Money

Unfortunately, despite money being a base reason to fall away, it is sometimes a factor in why seemingly good men fail.

⁵ E.g. cognates of *plan*; cognates of *Apate*; cognates of *Dolos*; *Paralogizomai*; *Pagis*; *Brochos*; *Deleazo*; *Kapeleuo*. Note English words: deceit; deceiver; delusion; beguile; snare; corrupt.

Judas followed Jesus for three years and was amongst those who preached the good news and cast out demons; yet in the end he betrayed the Lord for a mere 30 pieces (sanctuary shekels) of silver (Matt 26:15; cf. Zech 11:12). This was the amount of the fine if a man's ox gored a servant (Ex 21:32). Thirty silver shekels were equal to 120 *denarii* and this was the common price for the meanest slave.⁶

A *denarius* was a day's wage for a Roman, containing 60 grains of silver; four *denarii* equals a Jewish silver shekel.⁷ Rabbis stated that a shekel usually weighed half an ounce.⁸ On the basis of a day's wage today, this would be less than £5,000 (some would say much less). On the basis of the current price of a silver Britannia (ounce), this would be roughly £450. AT Robertson reckons it was worth less than £5 in the mid-20th century.⁹ EW Johnson reckoned it was worth \$120 in 1891.¹⁰ Clearly there is no agreement, but it is not a great deal of money.

This minimal sum for such a heinous act shows contempt in both the Sanhedrin and Judas.

Ordinarily, it is bad leaders that become rich from their ministry, like the US televangelists that have multiple mansions, fleets of limousines and private jets. But sometimes apparently good men fall into the temptation of mammon.¹¹

Putting the work before Jesus

This is a common mistake and the ruin of many sincere men whose zeal for God outweighed their dependence and focus upon Christ.

In some people there comes a point where the ministry, considered as God's service, becomes everything. The test is that if a man lost everything, would he still be content just to worship Jesus?

This is why God tests us; he challenges our motives. If we fail the test the work takes over. If we pass the test, the work may even evaporate, but our heart service continues.

Bible history is full of examples of men who lost everything, in human terms, but gained everything in godly terms. Abraham is a good example who left the advanced civilisation of Ur (with under-floor heating) to live in tents the rest of his life. He gave Lot the choice of the best pastoral land (Gen 13:9-11), who had not even been called by God.¹² Joseph lost everything for being faithful and ended up in prison. Jeremiah ended up in a slimy pit. Job lost literally everything of value to him bar his wife. Yes, sometimes God restores men's fortunes in this life, like Joseph or Job, but sometimes not. The test is whether we still focus on God when we lose everything.

⁶ Rabbinic tract Erachin, fol. 14, and Shekalim, cap. 1. Maimonides Hilch. Niske Mammon. c. 11. sect. 1.

⁷ Josephus, Antiq. l. 3. c. 8. sect. 2.

⁸ Jarchi Perush in Exod. xxi. 32. Gerundensis Ad fin. Expos. in Pentateuch. Abarbinel Comment. in 1 Reg. 7. fol. 221. 2. Gedaliah ben Jechaiiah, Shalsholet Hahohala, fol. 72. 2. Masius In Joshua, 7. 21. p. 135. Arias Montanus De Siclo, ut supra. (in Jud. Antiq. p. 126) Waserus De numis Heb. l. 2. c. 3.

⁹ Robertson's Word Pictures.

¹⁰ The People's New Testament (1891) by B. W. Johnson.

¹¹ Wealth regarded as an evil influence or false object of worship and devotion. It was taken by medieval writers as the name of the devil of covetousness, and revived in this sense by Milton. The origin is the late Middle English: via the late Latin; from the New Testament Greek *mamōnas* (see Matt. 6:24, Luke 16:9-13), from the Aramaic *māmōn* 'riches'.

¹² Gen 12:4, 'So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him'.

Some really important prophets never wrote any books or did any miracles and yet were vital in the work of God. They condemned evil in kings or directed a king in the way to go. Yet most of their names are not even known by Bible readers. They did not promote a great work and get a big name, but simply obeyed God and did something important that is overlooked. These would include: Nathan, Iddo, Ahijah, Shemaiah, Jehu, Oded, and Micaiah.

When you cannot be at peace and content if the whole work collapsed, then you are in trouble. In this case the work of God has become an idol.

Some of the greatest saints were those whom God took early. He did not allow the work they had built to become a monolith around their necks. Such were David Brainerd (dead at 29) or Murray M'Cheyne (dead 30). Spurgeon died at 58, Luther at 53 while Calvin died at 55; all relatively young.

Loving the world

Again this is a base reason for dishonouring God and yet so many people fall into this temptation.

In some cases, men who have only few talents in worldly terms rise to great height through serving God. They achieve fame and fortune that they could never have gained in secular employment because they were not bright enough. Having reached a certain plateau in worldly fame and material wealth they decide that they like such a life and fall from grace to enjoy material things. They begin to enjoy the company of successful worldly people rather than serving the flock, whom they now consider as beneath them. What becomes important to them is playing golf with rich people; going to fashionable dinner parties with celebrities; attending premiers of various sorts; being friends with the rich and famous.

Even Paul saw this in his colleagues, 'Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica' (2 Tim 4:10). Thessalonica was a large and prosperous city in Macedonia; the capital of one of the four Roman districts. As such it provided all the material temptations that one could find in the ancient world.

Incredible as it seems; loving the world is a common reason for seemingly good men to fall.

Sexual temptation

Finally, there is always the danger of sexual temptation. Many men have crashed on the rocks of this sin. There is a great power in lust that has to be fled from (2 Tim 2:22). You cannot flirt with lust or you will be defeated. Run away from it.

I once knew a pastor who was an exceptional Bible teacher. He planted a vibrant house church that raised many good believers for years. But then this man fell into gross sin. First he got rid of his associate elder pastor, greatly damaging this man's faith for years. He gathered young men as associate elders whom he could easily dominate. Then he committed adultery with many of the ladies in his church – which then collapsed. The people dispersed and some fell away, even previous elders. Others were scarred for life.

In these evil days there is not just the danger of normal fornication but the additional temptation of homosexuality, which many modern leaders have fallen prey to. The fact that this is a common reason for spiritual collapse is a grave warning to everyone.

Why does God allow this to his people?

Perhaps many people will agree with me on the lessons to learn why people fail but will still have big questions as to why God allows this to happen.

A lack of true faith

Perseverance of the regenerate

Firstly, we have to stipulate that genuine believers, though they fail, will still be preserved by God unto the end. Despite David's serious sins towards the end of his life, his repentance showed that God preserved him. He was still spoken of as the friend of God long after his death. Those that are truly joined to Christ in eternal life will not fall away – but they may sin and may be chastised for it.

No one can presume upon this because it only applies to truly regenerated people and many in the churches are not regenerated. They will not survive.

Professing Christians that fall

Having said that, it is a fact that many people in churches today, even evangelical churches, are not genuine believers. I have stated that I believe that as many as 90% of people in Charismatic churches are not saved; the published testimonies of Alpha Course conversions show that most are not saved. I base that upon the fruits that I have seen in such people. One of the bad fruits is that most churchgoers cannot even articulate the Biblical Gospel. So many committed Charismatic 'believers' did not persevere but fell away after a decade or so. Leaders, elders, lesser leaders of all sorts and ordinary members all fell away within my lifetime; some into very serious gross sins. I have lost count of the fallen.

So some people fall because they were never believers in the first place. In recent decades a number of famous leaders have completely fallen away due to some or another sin. When this is not repented, and it is gross public sin, then we can affirm that such were never true believers. It matters nothing that they were famous and popular preachers with large churches.

So some people fall because they were never true believers.

Testing

God tests his people; he states this openly (Exod 16:4; Judg 2:22; Prov 17:3; Jer 6:27). His true church is a people that are not compromised and have been 'proved' like silver in a furnace (Zech 13:9; Job 23:10; Mal 3:3).

Leaders are tested more fully (Jm 3:1). When a leader fails God's test he falls into whatever errors he is glued to. He may continue in fame and money but there is no testimony. Sadly, I have seen this many times. Sometimes it takes decades for the church of a fallen leader to collapse into obscurity.

Churches are also tested, sometimes by having a bad leader. Congregations are responsible for the church and therefore must judge a bad leader and remove him from damaging the church further (Rev 2:12-17). Churches that fail to do this become dross; the lampstand has been removed.

A warning

One reason why God allows seemingly good men to fall away is to provide a warning to other church members and leaders. The dire collapse of many in recent years should have been a wake-up call to everyone else.

The balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility

This is an age-old debatable question, which can never be truly explained. God is sovereign over men and yet he allows their free will. In some mysterious way, the free will of men does not countermand God's sovereignty but he controls it to his purposes.

Thus God allows leaders to pursue their service according to their free will. When this will is in accord with God's will, then there is a spiritual testimony that is pure. When man's will diverges from God's will then the work becomes fleshly and meaningless.

Paul's service was pure and faithful and stands the test of time. Yet many of his co-workers that started out pure fell away over time, some seriously so. These would include: Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim 1:19-20), Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim 2:17) and Demas (2 Tim 4:10).

God is gracious in allowing men the freedom to serve him according to their abilities and will. But it behoves us, as God's servants, to ensure that we are following God's will by earnestly studying his word and learning from history. Our freedom lies within his commandments – the law of Christ.

Conclusion

The fact that good men fall away is evident; it is before our eyes and fills the pages of church history. Fully understanding why seemingly good men desert a merciful, gracious God is still a mystery. How can men know the dangers of sin and judgment, and learn of God's gracious mercy and salvation and then ignore that salvation and choose death?

Yet there are levels of falling. These include:

- Completely falling away as if one was never a believer at all but not falling into gross public sin. Result – Hell.
- Falling into gross sin and never repenting. Result – Hell.
- Falling into gross sin and later repenting. Result – restoration.
- Falling from leadership due to error but not falling from grace. Putting leadership down and repenting. Result – restoration.
- Failing in leadership through errors but not repenting of them and staying in leadership and yet not falling from grace (continuing to have faith in Christ). Result – losing the reward.
- Failing in leadership through errors and not repenting and falling from grace. Result – Hell.

Staying on the right path is not easy, as Jesus warned us (Matt 10:38, 16:24, 19:24). The believer needs to avail himself of grace from God all the time and not trust in his own strength. Only by grace can we persevere.

The key is dependence upon God for all things and focusing on Christ all the time. In the work Christ must be pre-eminent.

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