

Book Review: *Falling Away*  
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*Falling Away Why Christians Lose Their Faith & What Can Be Done About It*, by Brian Simmons, Abilene, TX: Hillcrest Publishing Company, 2005, 139 pp. ISBN: 0-89112-496-9. \$11.99.

Brian Simmons currently teaches at Cascade College in Portland, Oregon. He teaches communications and works with theater students. He holds degrees from Oklahoma Christian University, Pepperdine University, and Purdue University. He uses his research skills to uncover information that is helpful in analyzing why people fall away from the faith.

Simmons launches out on a topic that is not frequently taken up by other scribes. He also tackles an issue within the church that is rather unpleasant and most would rather avoid. However, the subject is addressed in the New Testament and should be of concern for every church leader and compassionate Christian who loves his/her fellow Christian.

The paperback book is divided into twelve chapters. At the end of each chapter, except the last, questions for discussion are given and endnotes appear. This feature makes the book usable for small group discussions.

One of the questions that the reader is confronted with initially is: "what was the intended audience Simmons had in mind for his book?" Is it the Churches of Christ? Is it the religious world at large? He seems to focus on "Christian" religious groups as ascertained from the research data collected and shared. This exposes an ecumenical approach. No doubt, this effects his view of the meaning of falling away which becomes evident in the definitions provided in the book.

In chapter one, Simmons establishes the reality of falling away. Reliable surveys have been done which show an apostasy rate as high as 40% among adult American Christians. Others show a rate as low as 10-15%. The average apostasy rate is 25% (3). Catholics have a higher apostasy rate than Protestants. In the Church of Christ faith tradition, the apostasy rate is 50% for individuals 18 to 25 years old (3). It is estimated that over 75% of all Mormons will fall away from the faith at some point in their lives (3).

Simmons proceeds to define "falling away." He focuses on three ways to define this phrase. First, falling away involves a fundamental change in one's relationship with the Lord. Second, falling away means changing faith traditions. Third, falling away is disassociating with any religious organization (5). The first definition given above takes precedence over the others. There is one true religion and to fall away from it involves forsaking the Lord and His truth.

Chapter two examines what the Bible says about falling away. God's word can be divided into at least three areas on this topic. First, warnings about falling away. Second, illustrations of those who fell away. Third, causes of falling away. God's word teaches the possibility of falling away and warns of its danger. Simmons discusses several passages of Scripture and the Greek words used to describe falling away. One of these words is *aphistemi* (meaning "to desert," "forsake," "abandon," or "defect from" 13). It is found in Luke 8:6, 13. Another is *skandalizo* (meaning "a trap," or "a stumbling block causing someone to fall." It is found in Matt. 24:9-10. A third word is *pararreo* (a nautical term meaning "to flow past" or "to slip away"). It is found in Heb. 2:1-3. Finally, Simmons examines *ekpipito* ("to fall off," to run aground"). It is found in 2 Peter 3:17. Simmons surveys several passages where these words are

used. Among the examples given in the New Testament of individuals who have fallen away, Simmons lists Hymenaeus and Alexander (I Tim. 1:19-10); unidentified women (I Tim. 6:15); the apostasy of the Israelites in the Old Testament and some of the kings mentioned there. Some of the reasons people fall away are also traced by Simmons. He mentions: (1) lack of spiritual leadership; (2) associating with the wrong people; (3) the successes and failures of life; and (4) a shallow faith (18-22).

Chapter three addresses difficult biblical texts involving the topic of falling away. Three passages are studied. They are I John 2:19; 2 Peter 2:20-21; and Hebrews 6:4-6. In the first passage, Simmons concludes that there are some Christians in name only. They are not authentic in their faith and consequently fall away. In the second passage, Simmons wrestles with what it means to be “worse off” or “better off.” He gives three plausible explanations of the meaning and leaves it to the reader to decide. The final passage considered has several problems. What does it mean to say that a person who falls away cannot be brought back to repentance? It is possible to be so hardened by sin, that the human heart will not repent. What does it mean to crucify afresh the Son of God? In falling away, one is returning to the position formerly held—thus rejecting Christ as the Messiah/savior. The initial rejection of Christ led to His crucifixion.

Simmons takes up several myths related to falling away in the fourth chapter of his book. He states that “Myths are powerful things” (33). Four myths are discussed by the author. The first is that falling away is simple. Actually, falling away is complex. Many factors are involved. Armand Mauss isolates three: cognitive (coming to disbelieve the tenets of one’s religious faith and replacing them with secular beliefs), affective (emotional—stop feeling like you fit in) and social (unsatisfying social experiences) (36-37). The second myth is that people run away from God. Falling away is a dynamic process that happens over time. Studies show that the first step in the process of drifting away from the faith is doubt (39). One who holds serious doubts over a long period of time is susceptible to falling away. Third, people consider themselves apostates. People in the midst of apostasy didn’t feel alarmed about their changing status (40). Even after falling away, many stated that they were still religious. They felt they could relate to God directly without the church. Fourth, people fall away because of doctrinal disagreements. Very few people leave the church because of doctrinal disagreements. Interpersonal conflicts with church leaders or other members of the congregation play a greater role in the falling away process. Strong doctrine is not detrimental to church growth or to falling away.

An important question is addressed in chapter five—who is most likely to fall away? The author attempts to identify a profile of the person who may be close to falling away. The procedure for obtaining this information was easy—just ask those who have fallen away why they left. The author lists six categories of dropouts: family tension dropouts (composed mostly of people younger than 22); weary dropouts (those who find church boring); lifestyle dropouts (object to the moral teaching of Christianity); spiritual need dropouts (spiritual needs are not being met by the congregation); anti-change dropouts (object to changes in worship style, doctrine, etc.); and intermarriage dropouts (people who marry someone not a Christian). Simmons also categorizes the apostate in regards to two primary elements of the Christian life: the extent of their beliefs and the quality of their community life (50). This produces four groups: fervent follower, ritualist, outsider and apostate. These categories help to identify those who are likely to become apostates.

Simmons also examines the research of C. Kirk Hadaway who gives five profiles of those who may fall away. They are: successful swinging singles; sidetracked singles; young settled liberals; young libertarians, and irreligious traditionalists (53).

Chapter six looks at the signs that someone is falling away. Simmons examines four stages of falling away: first doubts, seeking alternatives, turning point, and creating the “ex-role”. These stages relate to changes in social roles. While being a Christian is not a role but a way of life, the stages help in analyzing whether or not one would be likely to fall away.

Simmons examines the causes of falling away in chapters seven and eight. He emphasizes that these characteristics do not guarantee that one would fall away, but are areas of concern. Young adults are at greater risk than anyone else of falling away. Males are at a greater risk of falling away than females. Most of those who fall away had a weak faith to begin with. People with an intellectual orientation are more likely to fall away. Those who are not well-adjusted in life are more likely to fall away. Those raised in a home where spiritual hypocrisy was displayed are more likely to fall away. People with poor parental relations are more likely to fall away. People in unhappy marriages are more likely to fall away. People coming from broken homes or who are single are more likely to fall away.

The number one reason people fall away is discussed in chapter nine. What is it? The number one reason people fall away from the faith is that they marry outside of their faith (98). This reality has been consistently found in research dating back to 1954 (98). Interfaith marriages produce more conflict, greater tension and generally less satisfaction with their relationships.

Hope is given in chapter 10. Since faith in God is dynamic rather than static, the possibility of returning to one’s faith after leaving it is real. In fact, nearly 80% of those who fall away from their faith will return at some point in their lives (105). “The most common pattern was that people who dropped out in their early teens or twenties returned 5 to 10 years later” (105). Why do people return to their faith? Several answers are given. They realize their need of the Lord. This new awareness is often triggered by some “turning point” in the life of the apostate (Luke 15—the Prodigal Son). Two things are emphasized by Simmons regarding this event. The first is that those who love the apostate should be praying for a turning point in his/her life. The second is that positive events are all too often less effective in leading the lost back to the Lord (107). Some apostates returned to the Lord because of consideration for the spiritual well-being of their children. All apostates are more likely to return to the Lord if they know that they will be met with love, joy and support.

In chapter 11, Simmons reveals a more ecumenical view toward the subject of falling away. He discusses changing faith traditions. Research indicates that up to 40% of American Protestants have switched faith traditions at least once in their lives (116). Simmons does not believe that merely switching faith traditions is apostasy (115-116). If there is only one true church (and there is—Eph. 4:4; 1:22-23), then forsaking the true church would amount to apostasy. Simmons states, “There are no instances in the Bible where someone changed faith traditions” (117). This is not true. Paul changed from the Jewish faith to the Christian faith (Acts 9). Actually, multitudes of Jews left Judaism for Christianity. Multitudes left paganism for Christianity in the first century as well (I Thess. 1:9). In both cases, people left religious error for religious truth. When people leave religious truth for religious error they fall away from the faith.

Chapter 12 focuses on prevention of apostasy. Simmons recommends that since some people are at greater risk than others of falling away, we should make note of them and closely

monitor their spiritual walk. Secondly, we should create a loving, supportive home life for our children. Thirdly, we must deal with crises of faith honestly. Fourthly, we need to attempt to meet as many needs as possible. People tend to stay in the faith where their needs are being met. Fifthly, we need to accept that some are inevitably going to fall away. Simmons likens the loss of a member of the church to a physician who loses a patient. Successful doctors mix three elements: (1) maximum effort to save; (2) mourning the occasional failure; and (3) resolve to help the next patient. Church leaders can follow a similar course in dealing with those who fall away.

Simmons' book is a beneficial work in helping to identify those who are at risk of falling away and planning some type of intervention to prevent the process from proceeding to its end. While one may not accept all of his tenets, the book will provide useful information for evaluating the response of the church to this universal problem.