

ABSTRACT

Title:

Perseverance and falling away: a biblical, theological and practical response to the reality of deconversion

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In the opening chapter of the first of his books on the issue of apostasy, B. J. Oropeza points out that 'whether Judas Iscariot betraying Christ, or Christians renouncing their faith due to severe persecution, heresy, temptation, or sceptical reasoning, apostasy has plagued the church throughout the ages.'¹ The subject is both fascinating, and hugely difficult. Theological perspectives on the issue abound, making a straightforward analysis of any of the aspects involved hugely complicated. Alongside this, it is impossible to ignore the fact that a lengthy period of time spent pondering cases of apostasy can easily lead to discouragement. What are we to make of the reality of certain individuals giving up on Christian faith and choosing to follow a different path?

This dissertation begins by acknowledging that apostasy or 'deconversion' is an unfortunate reality found both within the Bible itself, and throughout the history of the Christian faith. Chapter one deals with the various theological perspectives and discusses some key passages found in the Letter to the Hebrews. Chapter two gives a brief historical overview of the issue and seeks to describe something of the current situation. Chapter three highlights some of the negative impacts of secularism, biblical deconstruction, and various moral failures within the confessing church, and also makes note of the key theodicy problem. These central issues therefore guide suggestions made in chapter four, for a thoughtful response to the phenomenon. This response highlights the importance of clarity in teaching Christian conversion, perseverance, and sensitively dealing with issues of doubt. This chapter also acknowledges the significance of demonstrating the gospel in an authentic Christian lifestyle, the key role of consistent Christian apologetics, and the importance of ensuring that the truth of the gospel message is always shared with sincere love. Chapter five concludes the analysis by highlighting some aspects of the discussion which provide substantial reason for hope and encouragement.

This dissertation is a biblical, theological and practical study of the reality of deconversion and of how Christian leaders, particularly in the Church of Ireland context, should respond to the phenomenon.

¹ B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation* (Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), p 1.