Ten Views on the Falling Away

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Latter-day Saints have long known about the falling away or Apostasy of Christianity from the Church established by Jesus Christ. The two terms both come from 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Falling away is the expression used by the King James translators to render the Greek word apostasia, which came into English as a loan word: apostasy. The terms are thus synonyms for the same thing. The term apostasia¹ was a later form of the classical term apostasis² and a more intense form of the term stasis,³ all of which mean “dissension,” “revolt,” or “rebellion.” The Septuagint⁴ uses both the terms apostasia and apostasis to translate the Hebrew word ma'al as “disloyalty, infidelity, fraud (KJV: falsehood, grievously, sore, transgression, trespass),”⁵ mered as “rebellion (KJV: rebellion),”⁶ beliyya'âl as “uselessness, wickedness (KJV: Belial, evil, naughty, ungodly, wicked),”⁷ and mešûbâh as “falling away, apostasy (KJV: backsliding, turning away).”⁸

². Liddell and others, Greek-English Lexicon, 218–19.
³. Liddell and others, Greek-English Lexicon, 1634.
We will look at some new and old views of the Apostasy or falling away and what they tell us about the subject. While we could examine many different facets of the falling away, we will generally limit ourselves to looking at whether there was an Apostasy and the issue of divine authority in the early Christian Church.

By way of background, it is worth noting how Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant commitments to ecclesiology color different views of the topic. Catholics and Orthodox believe that the Church was established by Jesus and that the ecclesiastical hierarchy goes back to the Apostles, if not to Jesus. This is necessary to establish the validity of the offices and authority of each denomination. Thus, Catholics assert that “the first Christian communities immediately established their ecclesiastical offices, which were considered necessary for guaranteeing the operation and development of the church” and included bishops, elders (or presbyters), and deacons.9 Protestants reject the authority of the Catholic and Orthodox churches and, rather than a tradition of authority stretching back to the Apostles, posit a priesthood of all believers. They see the organization and hierarchy of the Catholic Church as a sign of corruption and claim that there were no rigid offices and authority at an early stage of Christianity and that the offices were a sign of corruption. This was articulated by Max Weber, who hypothesized that earlier charismatic movements (Protestants) were replaced by later hierarchies (Catholics).

This yields two competing interpretations and understandings of the sources. As Karl Popper notes,

In history . . . the facts at our disposal are often severely limited and cannot be repeated or implemented at our will. And they have been collected in accordance with a preconceived point of view; the so-called ‘sources’ of history record only such facts as appeared sufficiently interesting to record, so that the sources will often contain only such facts as fit in with preconceived theory . . . . There will always be a number of other (and perhaps incompatible) interpretations that agree with the same records, and that we can rarely obtain new data able to serve as do crucial experiments in physics . . . then we shall give up the naïve belief that any definite set of historical records can ever be interpreted in one way only.10

The preserved record may not be sufficient to exclude either the Catholic or the Protestant view of the sources. Crucially, it may not be sufficient to exclude the Latter-day Saint view of the sources either.

**View 1: The Church Position**

The basic teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are generally well-known. We invite anyone interested to learn about them, and we provide tens of thousands of missionary volunteers who are eager and willing to teach anyone who wants to know about them. Missionaries teach standardized lessons whose content has been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. They are thus basic teachings of the Church.

The first missionary lesson discusses the Apostasy of the early Christian Church and specifically teaches the following:

After the Apostles were killed, there was a widespread falling away from the gospel and Church of Jesus Christ. This falling away is sometimes called the Great Apostasy. Because of it, God withdrew priesthood authority from the earth. This loss included the authority needed to direct the Church. As a result, the Church that Jesus had established was no longer on the earth.

During this time, people changed many gospel teachings. Much of the knowledge about the true nature of Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost was distorted or lost. People also changed priesthood ordinances, such as baptism. . . .

Prophets and apostles had foretold the falling away (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3). They had also foretold that the gospel and Church of Jesus Christ would be restored to the earth (see Acts 3:20–21). If there had not been a falling away, a restoration would not have been needed.11

Previous editions of the missionary lessons followed the same basic lines: “With the death of the Apostles, priesthood keys and the presiding priesthood authority were taken from the earth. . . . Important parts of the doctrine of faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost became distorted or forgotten. . . . This apostasy eventually led to the emergence of many churches. . . . The Savior’s Apostles foretold this universal apostasy. They also foretold that

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the gospel of Jesus Christ and His Church would be restored once more upon the earth.”

In the missionary lesson, the Apostasy explains the need for a Restoration of the Church. This began with the First Vision, where God and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith and “the Savior told Joseph not to join any of the churches, for they ‘were all wrong’ and ‘all their creeds were an abomination’ (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Even though many good people believed in Christ and tried to understand and teach His gospel, they did not have the fulness of truth or the priesthood authority to baptize and perform other saving ordinances.” Through Joseph Smith, “the fulness of the gospel was restored to the earth.” Those who sincerely seek can “know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God and that the true Church has been restored to the earth.”

In their instructions, missionaries are specifically asked to “help people understand that a universal apostasy occurred following the death of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. If there had been no apostasy, there would have been no need of a Restoration.” This teaching is not just confined to the missionary lessons.

In the third missionary lesson, missionaries teach, “The priesthood authority . . . , which was lost centuries ago through the death of the Savior’s Apostles, was restored through angelic administration to a modern prophet, Joseph Smith. . . . This authority makes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints different from any other religion in the world. By the Lord’s own declaration, it is ‘the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth’ (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30).”

In a letter written by Joseph Smith now included in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith discusses the idea of gospel dispensations as dispensations of the power and authority of the priesthood to mortals: “Nevertheless, in all ages of the world, whenever the Lord has given a dispensation of the priesthood to any man by actual revelation, or any set of men, this power has always been given” (D&C 128:9). Latter-day Saints accordingly hold a view of God dispensing the gospel and priesthood

authority to mortals from time to time and of it being taken away from time to time. The periods before a dispensation of the gospel are times of falling away or apostasy. This concept is key to understanding any concept of human history among Latter-day Saints.

This was recently affirmed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve in “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World.” As they stated,

Following the death of the original Apostles, Christ’s New Testament Church was lost from the earth. . . . We affirm that under the direction of the Father and the Son, heavenly messengers came to instruct Joseph [Smith] and re-establish the Church of Jesus Christ. The resurrected John the Baptist restored the authority to baptize by immersion for the remission of sins. Three of the original twelve Apostles—Peter, James, and John—restored the apostleship and keys of priesthood authority. Others came as well, including Elijah, who restored the authority to join families together forever in eternal relationships that transcend death. . . .

We declare that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, organized on April 6, 1830, is Christ’s New Testament Church restored. This Church is anchored in the perfect life of its chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, and in His infinite Atonement and literal Resurrection. Jesus Christ has once again called Apostles and has given them priesthood authority.17

Recent conference addresses reinforce these teachings:

In Old Testament history, we read of successive periods when the children of Israel honored their covenant with Jehovah and worshipped Him and other times when they ignored that covenant and worshipped idols or Baalim. The reign of Ahab was one of the periods of apostasy in the northern kingdom of Israel.18

The Savior taught His doctrine in the meridian of time, and His Apostles struggled mightily to preserve it against a barrage of false tradition and philosophy. New Testament Epistles cite numerous incidents demonstrating that serious and widespread apostasy was already under way during the Apostles’ ministry.19

We know there was a falling away, or an apostasy, necessitating the Restoration of His true and complete Church in our time.20

We know the Apostasy occurred in part because the philosophies of men were elevated over Christ’s basic, essential doctrine. Instead of the simplicity of the Savior’s message being taught, many plain and precious truths were changed or lost. In fact, Christianity adopted some Greek philosophical traditions to reconcile people’s beliefs with their existing culture.21

Through centuries of apostasy and spiritual confusion, the deeper meaning of what Christ did in Gethsemane and on Golgotha became lost or corrupted.22

Following the apostasy and disintegration of the Church He had organized while on the earth, the Lord reestablished the Church of Jesus Christ once again through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The ancient purpose remains: that is, to preach the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and administer the ordinances of salvation—in other words, to bring people to Christ.23

President Russell M. Nelson has also taught about the Apostasy:

Prior to His Crucifixion, the Lord Jesus Christ had established His Church. It included apostles, prophets, seventies, teachers, and so forth. And the Master sent His disciples into the world to preach His gospel.

After a time the Church as established by the Lord fell into spiritual decay. His teachings were altered; His ordinances were changed. The Great Apostasy came as had been foretold by Paul, who knew that the Lord would not come again “except there come a falling away first.”

This Great Apostasy followed the pattern that had ended each previous dispensation.24

For the whole of its existence, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been committed to this view of history. It is the reason that Church leaders and members speak of it as the “restored Church.”25

25. See, for example, some general conference usage of some Apostles since 2010: David A. Bednar, “But We Heeded Them Not,” Liahona 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 15; Gary E.
View 2: Joseph Smith

The basic position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was articulated by Joseph Smith in January 1833 in a letter addressed to Noah Saxton, the editor of *The American Revivalist, and Rochester Observer*:

The time has at last arrived when the Gods of Abraham of Isaac and Jacob has set his hand again the seccond time to recover the rem-nants of his people which have been left from Assyria, and from Egypt and from Pathros &c. and from the Islands of the sea and with them to bring in the fulness of the Gentiles and establish that covenant with them which was promised when their sins should be taken away. see Romans 11, 25, 26, & 27 and also Jeremiah 31. 31, 32, & 33. This covenant has never been established with the house of Isreal nor with th[e] house of Judah for it requires two parties to make a covenant and those two parties must be agreed or no covenant can be made. Christ in the days of his flesh proposed to make a covenant with them but they rejected him and his proposals and in consequence thereof they were broken off and no covenant was made with them at that time but their unbe-lief has not rendered the promise of God of none effect; no, for there was another day limited in David which was the day of his power and then his people Isreal, should be a willing people and he would write his laws in their hearts and print them in their thoughts their sins and their eniquities he would remember no more, Thus after this chosen family had rejected Christ and his proposals the heralds of salvation said to them. “lo § we turn <un>to the gentiles,” and the gentiles received the covenant and were grafted in from whence the chosen family were broken off but the Gentiles have not continued in the goodness of God but have departed from the faith that was once delivered to the saints and have broken the everlasting covenant in which their fathers were established see Isaiah 24th 5th. and have become high minded and have not feared therefore but few of them will be gathered with the chosen

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family Has not the pride highmindedness and unbelief of the Gentiles provoked the holy one of Israel to withdraw his holy spirit from them and send forth his Judgments to scourge them for their wickedness; this is certainly the case, Christ said to his disciples Mark 16, 17 & 18 that these signs should follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out Devils they shall speap [speak] with new tongues they shall take up serpents and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover, and also in connection with this read 1 Corinthians 12 Chapt, By the foregoing testimonies or through the glass of the foregoing testimonies we may look at the Christian world and see the apostacy there has been from the Apostolic platform, and who can look at this, and not exclaim in the language of Isaiah, [“]the earth is defiled under the inhabitants thereof because they have transgressed the Laws; changed the ordinances and broken the everlasting covenant.”

Note particularly what Joseph Smith said the remedy for this situation should be:

And now what remains to be done under circumstances like these, I will proceed to tell you what the Lord requires of all people high and Low, rich and poor, male and female, ministers & people professors of religion, and nonprofessors in order that they may enjoy the holy spirit of God to a fulness, and escape the Judgments of God which are almost ready to burst upon the nations of the earth— Repent of all your sins and be baptized in water for the remission of them, in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Ghost, and receive the ordinance of the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power, that ye may receive the holy spirit of God, and this according to the holy scriptures, and of the Book of Mormon; and the only way that man can enter into the Celestial kingdom. These are the requisitions of the new Covenant or first principles of the Gospel of Christ.

Not three years from the organization of the Church and Joseph Smith is talking about an “apostacy . . . from the Apostolic platform.” This Apostasy consists of “depart[ing] from the faith” and “[breaking] the everlasting covenant.” The solution is for individuals to follow “the requisitions [sic] of the new Covenant or first principles . . . of the Gospel of Christ” which are to “repent of all your sins and be baptized in water for the remission of them, in the name of the father, and of the son,

and of the Holy Ghost, and receive the ordinance of the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power, that ye may receive the holy spirit of God.”

This outline of an argument, that the gospel was changed, the covenants were broken, and the authority was lost, and thus it was necessary to restore them to the earth, has been the teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for two centuries.

This 1833 letter is not, however, the earliest mention of the Apostasy in the writings of Joseph Smith. That distinction belongs to his 1832 history: “By searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.”

A quarter of a century later, Orson Pratt preached the same theme:

If it had not been for the great apostacy after the apostles had preached the gospel, during which the last vestige of the Church of Jesus Christ was rooted out of the earth by the wickedness of the children of men; if it had not been that the priesthood was taken from the earth and the power to preach the everlasting gospel in its fullness had ceased among the nations, I do not know that there would have been any necessity whatever for another revelation of the gospel, and its gifts, blessings and powers, and the priesthood and apostleship in the latter days. But I think it can be proved beyond the power of controversy or reasonable contradiction that the gospel of the Son of God, as it was preached in the days of the apostles, has been entirely rooted out from among men. I do not mean the letter of it; we have that in part; but I mean the power to preach it and to administer its ordinances; the power to build up the church and kingdom of God; the power to speak in the name of the Lord; the power which characterized the ancient servants of the living God; the power which rested on the inspired apostles by which they could call upon God and receive revelation from heaven. That power has been rooted out from the earth. A form has been left it is true,—in fact a great many forms; but what is the form without the power? What, for instance, is the use of preaching baptism for the remission of sins to the human family, if there is no person authorized and ordained from God to administer baptism to those who believe and repent? None at

all. People might go forth and preach baptism from age to age and from 
generation to generation, but who could be baptized, or what would be 
the use of it, unless there were authority to administer the ordinance?²⁹

Pratt did not want to end on a negative note: “But we do not wish to 
dwell on the subject of this great apostacy and the loss of authority of 
which we have been speaking. We desire to dwell upon a more pleasing 
subject, namely, the restoration of authority and power to minister the 
word, and the ordinances, and the Spirit of the gospel, to the children 
of men.”³⁰ At the time that Pratt gave this sermon, B. H. Roberts, one of 
the more articulate authorities on the subject, was only a year old, and 
another, James E. Talmage, was yet to be born.

While references to early Church leaders could be multiplied, it is 
useful to show that the general argument about the Apostasy goes back 
to the beginning of the Church. The argument continues to be used in 
the Church. Central to these claims are that the authority to perform 
ordinances, such as baptism and the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, had 
been lost after the death of the Apostles. The restoration of that authority had been key to Joseph Smith’s understanding of the Restoration of 
the Church. In his 1832 history, he outlined its projected contents, and 
even if he never got around to writing the narrative, he listed as impor-
tant: “Thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring 
of—Aangels to administer the letter of the Law <Gospel—> <-—the 
Law and commandments as they were given unto him—> and in <the> 
ordinencs, fourthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood 
after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinence 
from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demo-
stration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confered upon him 
and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c—.”³¹

The Church of Jesus Christ is a covenant organization. One becomes 
a member of the Church by entering into a covenant with God through 
participating in an ordinance: baptism. Covenants are agreements 
between God and humans. God dictates the terms of the covenant; we 
agree to them. In order for the covenant to be valid, it must be entered by 
both parties (or their representatives, their agents). In order for some-
one to represent God, God has to designate them as his representative

1886), 12:247 (June 14, 1868).
and grant them that authority. It is not something that we choose for ourselves. Because the Church of Jesus Christ is a covenant organization, both revelation (means by which God can communicate his will) and authority are prerequisites. Thus, loss of either revelation or divine authority will cause the Church to lose its legitimacy in God’s eyes.

In the multiple accounts of the First Vision, we are introduced to the same arguments that Joseph Smith used in his 1833 letter to Noah Saxton. In his 1838 account, Joseph Smith said, “My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right” (JS–H 1:18). In response, he was told “that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong” (JS–H 1:19).

Three facets of this declaration of the Apostasy from the First Vision accounts stand out:

1. It was universal. “The world lieth in sin and at this time and none doeth good no not one” (1832). “They were all wrong” (1838). “None of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom” (1842).

2. The teachings were corrupt. “They have turned asside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments[,] [T]hey draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me” (1832). “All their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof’” (1838). “All religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines” (1842).

3. The source of all these statements was Jesus Christ. “I saw the Lord and he spake unto me” (1832). “The Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight” (JS–H 1:19). “They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines” (1842).
While our accounts of the First Vision do not mention authority to administer covenants, this was also emphasized by heavenly messengers. Joseph Smith wrote his 1832 account in part to describe “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministering of—Angels to administer the letter of the Law—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—and in ordinances, [as well as] a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Keys of the Kingdom of God conferred upon him.”40 When John the Baptist visited Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, he promised that the priesthood authority “shall never be taken again from the earth, until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness” (D&C 13:1). This is a clear statement that the authority previously had been taken from the earth.

Joseph Smith’s teachings about the Apostasy spread through the Church. An 1842 editorial in the *Times and Seasons* took as its starting point: “All the Protestant world agree that the Roman Catholic, or mother church, is so corrupt, and so far apostatised from the truth, that a reformation was not only needed but absolutely necessary.”41 It then argued that the key issue was the authority to perform ordinances: if the Catholic Church did not have the authority to perform ordinances, then the Protestants did not have any authority either. “Now the very moment they (the Protestants) take this stand, they deprive themselves of every claim to authority from God, in ministering holy things, unless it is derived from the mother of abominations.”42 The key issue was authority. “Since the great apostacy from primitive Christianity, all the reformers of which we have any knowledge have fallen into this one inconsistency. . . . [T]he Protestants have sought a reformation in doctrine without a recommission and a new administration of ordinances.”43

Thus, the teachings of the Church on the Apostasy go back to Joseph Smith, who got them by revelation from Jesus Christ. The label of the Great Apostasy goes back to 1842.

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41. “Grapes from Thorns and Figs from Thistles,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 16 (June 15, 1842): 815.
42. “Grapes from Thorns and Figs from Thistles,” 816, emphasis original.
43. “Grapes from Thorns and Figs from Thistles,” 816.
View 3: The Book of Mormon

Though the term *apostasy* does not occur in the Book of Mormon, the Book of Mormon does contain both descriptions of apostasy and prophecies about the Apostasy both in the Old and New World. Here we will concern ourselves only with the prophecies for the Old World.

In vision, Nephi sees the death of Jesus: “And after he [the Lamb of God] was slain I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb” (1 Ne. 11:34).

And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Behold the world and the wisdom thereof; yea, behold the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And it came to pass that I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (1 Ne. 11:35–36)

Later Nephi recounted,

I saw among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church. And the angel said unto me: Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity. And it came to pass that I beheld this great and abominable church; and I saw the devil that he was the founder of it. And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and I saw many harlots. And the angel spake unto me, saying: Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church. And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity. (1 Ne. 13:4–9)

Nephi later notes that the great and abominable church “is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth” (1 Ne. 14:10). The Book of Mormon later clarifies that “he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; for they are they who are the whore of all the earth; for they who are not for me are against me, saith our God” (2 Ne. 10:16).
Nephi notes that “the desires of this great and abominable church” are “gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing,” and “harlots.” The emphasis on clothing might strike the modern reader as odd, but cloth was a major form of wealth in Nephi’s day. For example, an Egyptian wedding agreement spells out that in the event of divorce, the wife will receive silver, emmer wheat, and the cloth that she had made while married.\(^44\)

The desires ascribed to the great and abominable church are elaborated later in the record:

For the time speedily shall come that all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake; they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet. (1 Ne. 22:23)

Later Nephi sees a book, which

proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew. And I, Nephi, beheld it; and he said unto me: The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets; and it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many; nevertheless, they contain the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles. (1 Ne. 13:23)

Nephi is told that

after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men. (1 Ne. 13:26–27)

\(^{44}\) P. Louvre 7846.6 (year 22 of Amasis = 549 BC), in Erich Lüddeckens, Ägyptische Eheverträge (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), 14–15.
The state of apostasy will not be allowed to remain, however: “Neither will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness, which thou beholdest they are in, because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church, whose formation thou hast seen” (1 Ne. 13:32).

The Book of Mormon predicted that the Apostasy, which it describes as “that awful state of blindness,” would come after the death of the Apostles and that the motivations behind it would be greed, lust for power, desire for popularity, and carnal appetites. As a result of this rebellion, plain and precious parts of the Bible and the covenants of the Lord would be removed.

**View 4: Jesus on the Apostasy**

Jesus also foretold the Apostasy to his Apostles. Any consideration of the Apostasy should take this into account.

In his instructions to the Twelve, Jesus told them “ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 10:22; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17). “They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2).

Jesus’s sermon on the Mount of Olives is provoked by three questions: “Tell us, when shall these things [the destruction of the temple] be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (Matt. 24:3). Verses 4–20 answer the first question. Verses 21–51 answer the second two questions. First, many would come in Christ’s name and many would be deceived (Matt. 24:5). Then (tote) the disciples would be delivered up to be afflicted and killed (Matt. 24:9). Then (tote) disciples would be offended and deliver each other up (Matt. 24:10). False prophets would arise and deceive many (Matt. 24:11). Iniquity would abound and the disciples’ love for one another would be extinguished (psugēsetai, Matt. 24:12). The temple would then be destroyed (Matt. 24:15–21). After that time would be the time of “false Christs, and false prophets” who should not be believed, even though they might deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:23–24). This would last until the Son of Man should send his angels to gather the elect (Matt. 24:31). Jesus had previously warned that false prophets would be greedy and take things meant for others (harpages) but could be recognized by the things they did (Matt. 7:15–20).

Jesus thus prophesied a time when the Apostles would be put to death and false prophets and false Christs would hold sway on the earth.
View 5: Other New Testament Writers on the Apostasy

Jesus was not the only person in the New Testament who foretold a falling away. In one of the earliest letters of Paul, Paul tells the Saints in Thessalonica not to expect that “the day of the Lord has arrived,” for it would not come “unless a rebellion (apostasia) came first and the wicked man appeared” (2 Thes. 2:2–3, my translation). This should not have been news to them. “Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?” (2 Thes. 2:5).

To the Saints in Colossia, Paul warned, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments (stoicheia) of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). Paul thought that philosophy, deception, the traditions of men, and conduct of the world were threats to the Primitive Church.

Paul also warned the Saints in Ephesus, the last time he saw them, “I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30). The flock would not be spared (pheidomenoi), they would all be gone, and the problem would arise from the disciples’ own number (ex hymôn).

Paul foresaw that things would become worse. Immediately after telling Timothy how to give instruction in the Church, he writes,

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was. (2 Tim. 3:1–9)

One thing that would change would be what was taught in the Church: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but

45. For this section, I am using the King James Version unless I explicitly note that I am using my own translation.
after their own lusts [epithymias] shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables [mythous]. (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The antecedent for “they” in these verses reaches back seven verses: “But evil men [ponēroi de anthrōpoi] and seducers [goētes] shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). A goēs was a particular type of individual; it was someone who taught or practiced a religion that was seen as deceptive and destructive.

Peter also warned that

there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies [hairesis apōleias, destructive divisions], even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. . . . Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever. For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. (2 Pet. 2:1, 15–18)

Using strong language and scriptural allusions (many of which have been omitted from the quotation), Peter warned his contemporary readers that false teachers who secretly deny the Lord but covet gain and the lusts of the flesh would come to gain their own followers among the early Christians.

Not only did the New Testament writers warn about apostasy, they documented it happening around them. In some ways, this is not terribly surprising. Communication to and from Church leaders was difficult and slow. Local Church leaders and members of the time often had less experience in the gospel than the typical young man blessing the sacrament does now. They came from diverse religious backgrounds that were usually incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were surrounded by a culture whose practices were usually hostile to the commandments. Rather than get mired in the endless scholarly debates about New Testament chronology, we shall survey the evidence geographically from east to west.

Judea: “Whence come wars and fightings among you?” (James 4:1).

Galatia: “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?” (Gal. 3:1).
Laodicea: “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:15–17).

Sardis: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God” (Rev. 3:2).

Thyatira: “I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols” (Rev. 2:20).

Ephesus: “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:4–5).

Pergamum: “I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:14–16).

Thessalonica: “We hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (2 Thes. 3:11).

Corinth: Paul said that there were divisions (schismata) among the Corinthian saints (1 Cor. 1:10). “For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies [sects, cliques] among you” (1 Cor. 11:18–19). “For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions [erides] among you” (1 Cor. 1:11). For modern readers “contentions” often brings up the idea of arguments, but eris also means “fistfight.” “Ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (1 Cor. 3:3). As a result, they were suing each other: “There is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another” (1 Cor. 6:7). “It is reported commonly that there is fornication [porneia, sexual immorality] among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away
from among you” (1 Cor. 5:1–2). Not only are some of the Corinthians immoral, they are proud of their immorality. Some were also denying basic Christian beliefs: “How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:12).

Rome: “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think” (Rom. 12:3).

Toward the end, John related, “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church” (3 Jn. 1:9–10).

Given the problems documented in the first century, the wonder is not that teachings and authority were lost but that anything that could be called Christianity survived at all.

**View 6: Efforts to Redefine the Apostasy**

While Latter-day Saint scholars have traditionally understood the Apostasy to entail the altering of the teachings of Jesus and the associated practices, as well as the loss of divine authority, recently some Latter-day Saint scholars have objected to previous narratives about the Apostasy put forth by Latter-day Saints.

Those who want to change the Church’s “traditional apostasy narrative” see it as being neither “intellectually defensible” nor “pastorally productive.” They have “ethical concerns” and “historiographical concerns” with the Church’s teachings about the falling away: “Ethical concerns arise from intimations of wickedness and deliberate deception on the part of well-meaning Christians, while historiographical concerns arise from reliance on dated secondary treatments rather than reliable primary sources.” They claim that the traditional understanding of the Apostasy in the Church “owes its origins and developments to the efforts of, primarily, three authors: B. H. Roberts . . ., James E. Talmage . . ., and Joseph Fielding Smith.”

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47. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 106 n. 4.

48. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 105; Wilcox, “Narrating Religious Heritage,” 222; Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young, “Introduction,” in *Standing...
“historians today recognize that the synthesized humanist/Reformation narrative of a dark age of apostasy, born in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is not supported by historical evidence,”49 they claim that “academic historians challenged and largely rejected” the Church’s traditional narrative “as inadequate to understand the complexity and richness of the medieval and early modern periods.”50

As a result, some of these scholars take issue with the claim in “the Church’s missionary manual” that “if there had been no apostasy, there would have been no need of a Restoration.”51 They reject it as “simplified, standardized,”52 “binary logic”53 and claim that the Church’s teachings on an Apostasy are not charitable54 because the Church’s “narrative discouraged Latter-day Saints from seriously engaging with history before 1820, and it hampered friendships with people of faith whose religious histories and traditions were dismissed as ‘gross darkness.’”55 To these scholars, to “imagine a scenario in which other churches are lacking God’s guidance—part of a great apostasy—and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a mere replacement of what was lost” is “to dismiss the inspired insights of ancient Christians or even other modern Christians.”56 After all, these are, in their view, “our kindred Christian saints” and “our

_Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy_, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15. In making these claims, scholars typically point to the work of Eric Dursteler, conveniently ignoring that his work does not support their thesis; Eric R. Dursteler, “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy’: The Evolution of Latter-day Saint Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” in _Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy_, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 31: “during Mormonism’s first sixty years, discussions of apostasy were very much part of the faith’s dialogue.”


believing mothers and fathers,” and we should be “turning our hearts to our spiritual fathers and mothers so that we can learn to love and appreciate them.” They therefore desire “greater care in discussing a great apostasy—a term that does not appear in our standard works.”

Some of these scholars think that “a call to return to the Abrahamic covenant forms a major—if not the chief—foundation of the project of the Restoration.” For them “the ‘Great Apostasy,’ whatever else it includes, concerns first and foremost the transformation of the self-understanding of Jesus’s followers through a reconceptualization of Israel’s covenants as exclusively pertaining to themselves. It concerns, in other words, a misappropriation of Israel’s identity.” The covenants that would be lost “are clearly not covenants associated with particular ordinances—for example, the baptismal covenant or covenants made during the temple endowment.” In other words, “being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 18:10) is not “the right covenant theology.” Authority is not an issue because “in Paul’s time, these titles and the organizational structures that would come to define priesthood offices of the Church in coming centuries were new, still largely undefined, and much more fluid than they are today.”

Changing the understanding of the Apostasy entails a change in understanding the Restoration. Because “the Doctrine and Covenants never speaks explicitly of a restored church,” the Church might want to rethink whether it should “use that unscriptural phrase, restored church,” despite its use by Church leaders. They call on Latter-day Saints to rethink what it means to be “the only true and living church.”

60. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 126.
61. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 118, emphasis removed.
63. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 118, emphasis original.
One observer summarized the argument: these Latter-day Saint scholars “make it clear that they are not going to encourage, or even tolerate, the standard LDS view of early Christianity—the one where those silly Christians broke away from the truth after the apostles died and permitted Greek philosophy and Roman culture to permeate the plain and precious doctrines of Jesus Christ and turn His true church into something Great, Abominable, and of the Devil.”67

There is an irony in this approach to the Apostasy. The traditional narrative of Latter-day Saints about the Apostasy is claimed to depend on a “reliance on dated secondary treatments rather than reliable primary sources.”68 (Ironically, the accusation comes in an article on the Apostasy that cites not a single early Christian source.) This accusation is a two-edged sword because most of the secondary treatments that these scholars rely on themselves will be outdated before they retire. Quality is more important in scholarship than date.

**View 7: The Take Over**

It would be a mistake to think that the traditional Latter-day Saint view of the falling away is only featured in out-of-date sources and that more recent scholarship does not support the Latter-day Saint point of view. We will now look at some recent scholars’ work on early Christianity that supports the traditional Latter-day Saint narrative, one by a Catholic and two by Protestants, one of which extensively examines Orthodox sources.

One of the recent examinations of the early church is L. L. Welborn’s careful examination of the incident that generated *First Clement*.69 For Welborn, “few writings from the period of the origin of Christianity offer the historian such an unobstructed perspective.”70 *First Clement* is a letter written at the end of the first century or beginning of the second by Clement, the bishop of Rome, to the church in Corinth because of an incident that happened in the Corinthian church that Clement largely only alludes to. Welborn finds “no reason to doubt that First Clement is a

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68. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 106 n. 4.


70. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 1.
real letter occasioned by an actual incident.”71 “It is clear that the object of contention in the church at Corinth was ‘the office (or title) of bishop.’”72 Welborn argues that “if one wishes to hear Clement’s message, one must consult his Scripture citations in context, in order to grasp their relevance to the situation in the church at Corinth, as Clement perceives it.”73

Welborn notes that “the instigators of the στάσις [revolt]” or “rebels” are characterized as “rash, self-willed, immoderate, reckless, licentious, rebellious, arrogant, foolish, imprudent, uninstructed, immature, corruptible, disobedient, and seditious.”74 And yet, “Clement deplores the στάσις [revolt] ‘which a few rash and self-willed persons caused to blaze up to such a degree of insanity (ἀπόνοια).’”75 Welborn argues that Clement “points unambiguously to young men as the instigators of the uprising against the presbyters.”76 He concludes three things about the rebels: (1) “It seems unlikely that the men who led the revolt were older than thirty years of age, given the realities of demography in antiquity.”77 (2) “It seems likely that money was somehow involved in the conflict over ecclesial office at Corinth.”78 (3) “It is not impossible that the young rebels at Corinth alleged a lack of mental competence on the part of the elders whom they deposed from ecclesial office.”79 Welborn also argues that some in the congregation supported the rebellion.80

Welborn does not think that the evidence allows one to decide whether the rebels were clients81 or sons.82 He does, however, consider the motivations for the revolt. First, the rebels wanted to be in charge of the church.83 Second, “the administration of community resources motivated the young in their uprising.”84 And third, an “ideology,” or “intellectual ferment,” accompanied the revolt.85

71. Welborn, Young against the Old, 2.
72. Welborn, Young against the Old, 4.
73. Welborn, Young against the Old, 184.
74. Welborn, Young against the Old, 186.
75. Welborn, Young against the Old, 189.
76. Welborn, Young against the Old, 183.
77. Welborn, Young against the Old, 187.
78. Welborn, Young against the Old, 187.
79. Welborn, Young against the Old, 188.
80. Welborn, Young against the Old, 199.
81. Welborn, Young against the Old, 194–96.
82. Welborn, Young against the Old, 196–98.
83. Welborn, Young against the Old, 200.
84. Welborn, Young against the Old, 201.
85. Welborn, Young against the Old, 202.
Welborn concludes that the episode at Corinth addressed in *First Clement* was a watershed moment in the history of the Christian Church when the teachings of Jesus and Paul were “broken and destroyed.”86 For the writer of the epistle, “the agents of change in ecclesial office are dangerous revolutionaries who have overturned good social order.”87 Welborn also notes that we do not know whether the letter succeeded in rectifying the situation.88

To be sure, Welborn accepts a Protestant view of ecclesiology. For him, an *episkopos* is a mere “overseer” and not a bishop.89 He therefore sees Clement’s interference in the bottom-up governance of the church in Corinth as bad, interfering with the good self-governance of the Corinthian church. Latter-day Saints would see both Clement and the Corinthian rebels as in the wrong. Clement did not have authority over the church in Corinth as it was out of his jurisdiction. The Corinthian rebels, however, were also in the wrong, deposing of legitimately appointed church leaders so that the rebels could take over the church in Corinth.

**View 8: Casual Christians**

In a recent book, Nadya Williams tries to draw attention that the problem of cultural Christians has been around a long time, back to the beginning of Christianity in fact. She uses the term *cultural Christians* to mean “individuals who self-identify as Christians but whose outward behavior and, to the extent that we can tell, inward thoughts and motivations are largely influenced by the surrounding culture rather than by their Christian faith and the teachings of Jesus.”90 She is concerned that modern Christians wrongly idealize and idolize early Christians.

Williams, a military historian, is a convert to Protestantism from a secular Jewish background. She wrote the book because “both the American public at large and American Christians in particular have a very limited understanding of ancient history and the world of the early church.”91 She wanted to push back against those who proclaimed “the superiority of early Christians to us.”92 She also thought that “if so many of us too are

86. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 226.
88. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 224.
89. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 194.
cultural Christians, then trying to fix the world through politics or just through particular policies on marriage, for instance, will never work.”

Though her work is divided into three sections—the New Testament Era, the third century, and the fourth and fifth centuries—the driving impetus behind the narrative is current cultural Christian practices that she finds in contemporary Protestantism. What she says about the first century is the most relevant for seeing the Apostasy of the early Church.

Her first chapter discusses how the earliest converts to Christianity brought in “cutthroat” “Roman ideas of property”: “Using wealth to acquire power and using power to acquire more wealth.” She cites Ananias and Sapphira as the first cultural Christians: “Cultural religion is idolatry and a direct violation of this commandment because it involves worshiping something (in this case, public honor and prestige, along with personal wealth) as being on par with God by withholding from God something that already belongs to him.”

Williams makes the point that “the New Testament abounds with stern warnings to converts against falling away. . . . The reason that the New Testament repeatedly addressed this issue in the strongest terms is precisely because it was so common.” Williams sees cultural Christianity as a large factor in apostasy. “Though persecution was one reason for apostasy during the New Testament Era and beyond, we should not put the chief blame on it so hastily.” Williams sees apostasy in the earliest Church. “Much of the New Testament consists of letters written by concerned leaders to congregations that were going through these and many other cultural sins and challenges. The testimony of these letters has much to tell us about the everyday struggles of these early believers.” Williams sees apostasy on the individual level, with someone’s rebellion against God manifest by leaving the Church rather than corrupting it. She points out, however, that on the individual level, apostasy was encouraged by the general lack of commitment within the general membership of the Church. Early Christians were often half-hearted and often followed the prevailing winds of the culture around them.

Even after the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century when almost everyone was Christian, the average Christian was not necessarily pious. Most of them, for example, did not attend church services:

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93. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, xv.
94. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 12.
95. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 17.
96. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 62.
97. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 62.
98. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 63.
Out of some 255 churches [meaning physical buildings] in some 155 towns and cities, wherever the remains survive for the record, the expected attendance ranged between a mere 1 per cent and 8 per cent of the general population. Such are the figures we have seen at Alexandria, Constantineople, Rome, Anitoch, many little Syrian centers, Salona, Philippi, Oxyrhynchus, Carthage, Cirta, Tipasa, Nola. . . . Only by exception, in the major centers, is a church built to accommodate more than 500 persons; a more usual figure for cities that had perhaps 20,000 in population was 350 or 400 per church; and no great efforts were made to multiply the number of churches. . . . Need could be measured by those contemporaries who were best suited to do so, namely, the local bishops. They were guided in their planning by their experience of normal attendance, not by their lack of construction funds; and, as the fourth century draws to its end, and so into the fifth, we can see them sometimes cutting back the laity space in favor of the clergy, to make room for a more ample chancel, a solea or an ambo.99

Even if you packed the churches, only about one or two percent could attend,100 but even that seems to have been too much space: “The great Chrysostom observes often and with bitterness that the populace which recognizes him as perhaps the world’s greatest orator will not pay the slightest heed to his mildest admonitions, but continues to go about the business of money-getting while he, Sunday after Sunday, speaks to empty walls.”101 Your typical Christian in the fourth century was not the model of piety. Such seems to have been the case in the Middle Ages as well.102 The lack of righteousness among the laity of the Church is a symptom of the Apostasy, not its cause.

**View 9: The Casual Christianity of the Clergy**

In a recent volume, Ewa Wipszycka, a scholar mostly noted for her papyrological work, turns her attention to the interaction between monks

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100. Applying MacMullen’s method to the town where I live, if we count only the buildings, 10.3 percent of the population goes to church on Sunday. Since, however, more than one congregation meets in each building, if we count congregations, then 27.9 percent of the population goes to church on Sunday. Either figure dwarfs the estimates of church attendance in the fourth century.
and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. She is particularly interested in testing Max Weber’s thesis that charismatic movements conflict with traditional religious institutions. She finds, however, that his suggestions “do not help to understand those relations.”

Wipszycka uses three different types of sources in her study: the literary sources (hagiographies that substitute for historical accounts), the synodal decrees, and “editions of the hitherto unknown documentary evidence (it is fairly unlikely of sociologists of religion to read papyri).”

Wipszycka is interested in the way authority functions in the church in Late Antiquity, or from the late third to the seventh century. Her observations fall under three categories: ecclesiastical structure, hierarchical influence, and corruption.

Concerning ecclesiastical structure, Wipszycka finds that the church structure has changed from what it was in the first century or the second century: “The primitive (‘presbyterial’) structures of the Church, if they were still extant at the time, had already become marginalised.”

Concerning hierarchical influence, Wipszycka states, “The texts relevant to Egypt do not support the argument that presbyters, deacons, and other members of the clergy in monastic communities represented the interests of their bishops. I am not aware of any such case.” Similar situations occurred in Palestine though the source of the conflicts were different: “Relationships between monastic communities and the bishops were determined by doctrinal conflicts; monks and bishops (and patriarchs) were parties to these disputes.” These conflicts were “more important in Syria than in Egypt and Palestine.”

Finally, Wipszycka has much to say about corruption. Wipszycka notes that leaders of monastic communities, like Pachomius and Shenoute, “expelled from their communities not just individuals unsuited to monastic life but also monks guilty of sexual transgressions, fraud and other misdemeanours blemishing their reputation.”

103. Ewa Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church in Egypt and the Levant during Late Antiquity (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2021).
104. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 3–4.
105. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 459.
106. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 181–82.
107. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 182.
108. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 182.
109. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 183.
110. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 413.
111. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 183.
The problems, however, were greater than that; Wipszycka found that “conflicts inside the Church hierarchy resulting from unrestrained ambitions of more important bishops and causing divisions among them, only magnified the impunity of those who did not fear heavenly punishments. A bishop could be and often happened to be a saint, but he could as easily happen to be a tyrant. Still, studies of history of Late Antique Christian communities rather than just of activities of the Church hierarchy do not authorise the claim that the communities in question were for the most part led by tyrants; saintly bishops, however, were equally rare.”

Instead of gross wickedness or saintly bishops, what Wipszycka found was plenty of behavior that she classifies as “misdemeanour”: “Dishonest members of the clergy—chiefly bishops, and, to a lesser extent, presbyters and deacons—exploited material assets of monasteries mainly in order to increase the wealth of their families. Such thefts could assume various forms, and human greed bred astonishing schemes.” In modern terms, this is a called a breach of fiduciary duty.

View 10: The Early Christians

While recent secondary sources may provide unintentional support for the traditional narrative of the Church of Jesus Christ about the falling away, they do not replace the primary sources. Let us consider what the early Christians, or Christians from the first two centuries, had to say about apostasy, authority, and organization.

Apostasy in the Early Church

Amid all this talk about an Apostasy of the early Christian Church, the view of an Apostasy in the early Christian Church has largely not been examined. What has been looked at is heresy, which may, or may not, be the same things as apostasy. For our purposes here, we will start with the Apostolic Fathers.

There is good support for the latter-day Church’s teachings about the Apostasy in ancient sources. At the end of the first century, Christians observed that “a detestable and unholy rebellion (stasis)” had taken over the Church which was “utterly foreign to the elect of God.”

114. *1 Clement* 1:1. All translations in this section are the author’s own.
The revolt was instigated against their elders by the young, who kicked out the appointed bishops so they could take over the office. The early Christians observed that this had been prophesied: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles knew that there would be fights over the title of the bishopric.” The church historian Eusebius claimed “that the discussed apostasy [staseōs] took place among the Corinthians, Hegesippus is a trustworthy witness.”

It was not just power that was a temptation. Some were secretly unbelievers. They wanted to change the teachings and ordinances of the Church. “Many” who had been trusted were actually “wolves, they take captive those who are on the road to God by the lusts of the flesh.”

Because the Apostles were gone, there was nothing that anyone could do about the problems in the Church. One early Christian bishop who had known the Apostles complained, “I do not consider myself as qualified to give you commands like an apostle.” He knew he lacked the authority to do so.

The second-century Christian writer Hegesippus claimed that up to that period the Church had remained like a virgin pure and uncorrupted: for, if there were any persons who were disposed to tamper with the wholesome rule of the preaching of salvation, they still lurked in some dark place of concealment or other. But, when the sacred band of apostles had in various ways closed their lives, and that generation of men to whom it had been vouchsafed to listen to the godlike wisdom with their own ears had passed away, then did the confederacy of godless error take its rise through the treachery of false teachers, who, seeing that none of the apostles any longer survived, at length attempted with bare and uplifted head to oppose the preaching of the truth.

Hegesippus recognized that the Christian church of his day had been corrupted and that it was traceable to the absence of the Apostles.

Irenaeus, writing later in the second century, says that “all of these, and many later, in the middle period of the Church, revolted in their apostasy

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115. 1 Clement 3:3.
116. 1 Clement 44:4–6.
117. 1 Clement 44:1.
118. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.16.
123. Hegesippus, in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.32.7–8.
Hegesippus is listed among nine different writers whom the church historian, Eusebius, considered to have “written the sound faith and orthodoxy of apostolic tradition which has come down.”

Significantly, only one of those authors listed, Irenaeus, has survived in more than a fragmentary condition, and he only survives in translation. Hegesippus says that “the church in Corinth remained in the right teaching until Primus was bishop in Corinth.” Hegesippus is also quoted as saying, “Until this time the church was called a virgin because it had not yet begun to be corrupted by vain reports. Thebouthis, because he did not become a bishop, began to corrupt it. . . . From that time there were false Christs, false prophets, false apostles, who broke up the unity of the church with corrupt teachings against God and against his Christ.”

Whether or not it is popular to believe in an Apostasy, by the end of the first century, the ancient Christians were clear that the signs of apostasy were around them and that the early Church had rebelled against God. The earliest Christians after the New Testament knew that the Apostasy was a fact.

The term “apostate” appears principally in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Hermas even provides an explanation of what an apostate is. In his eighth parable, the parable of the willow tree, Hermas sees a large willow tree, which he is told represents both the law of God (*nomos theou*) and the Son of God (*ho huios tou theou*). He sees many people who all receive the Son of God, but different things happen to the various branches that each possesses, and what happens is interpreted. Depending on what these people do to their branches, they receive different rewards. The worst group is “the apostates (*apostatai*), and traitors of the church, those who blaspheme the Lord by their sins, and also those who were ashamed of the name of the Lord by which they are called.” All of these refused to repent even when the invitation was extended to them. There was another group which was “close to them. For they were hypocrites and those who introduced other teachings, and those who deconverted the servants of God, especially those who sinned, by not allowing them to repent but persuading them with foolish teachings.”

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124. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.4.3.
125. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.21.
126. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.22.2.
129. *Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes* 8.3.2.
131. *Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes* 8.6.5.
is further reinforced later in the same vision: “Others who lived with the gentiles in the end, and being corrupted by the worthless opinions of the gentiles, apostatized (apistēsan) from God, and did the works of the gentiles. They will be counted with the gentiles.”

Hermas also says that certain words that he was given in vision were “for the gentiles and the apostates (apostatais).” What were those words? “Wicked desires have arisen in your heart.” “Those who desire wickedness in their hearts, bring death and captivity upon themselves, especially those who concern themselves with this world and pride themselves on their riches and do not hold fast to the good things which are to come.” One of the problems, Hermas was told, was that “since you are so fond of your children, you did not correct your household, but you let them become completely corrupted, and therefore the Lord is angry with you.”

Clement of Rome does not use the word apostasy but instead uses the word stasis, or “revolt.” He was concerned with the rebellion in the church at Corinth. He said he was writing because of an “unholy rebellion (staseōs) which was “foreign and strange to the elect of God” caused by “a few reckless and arrogant persons.” Clement wrote in hopes that “this vain apostasy (staseōs) might quiet down.”

This was not the way it used to be: “Every revolt (stasis) and every schism used to be an abomination to you.” As a result the church at Corinth prospered. Then came “jealousy and envy, contention and rebellion (stasis), persecution and chaos, war and captivity.” Those who promoted this rebellion were “those without honor, . . . the disreputable, . . . the foolish, . . . [and] the young.” “Each has abandoned the fear of God and become blinded in his faith, neither walking in the laws of his statutes, nor conducting himself in his duty to Christ, rather each walks in the desires of his wicked heart, assuming an unjust and impious jealousy.”

132. Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 8.9.3.
133. Shepherd of Hermas, Visions 1.4:2.
137. 1 Clement 1:1.
138. 1 Clement 63:1.
139. 1 Clement 2:6.
140. 1 Clement 3:1.
141. 1 Clement 3:2.
142. 1 Clement 3:3.
143. 1 Clement 3:4.
into despair, and many into doubt, and all of us into sorrow, and yet your rebellion (stasis) continues.” 144 “It is a disgrace, beloved, an exceeding great disgrace and unworthy of your conduct in Christ, to hear that the well-established and ancient church of Corinth should be in rebellion (stasiazein) against the elders because of one or two persons.” 145

Clement saw the rebellion as the result of jealously from some young church members who were jealous of those with authority and sought to seize it. He cited several examples of how jealousy led to apostasy. Notably, three times he referred to Dathan and Abiram, who “were led down to hell because they rebelled (dia to stasiasei) against Moses, the servant of God.” 146 “Jealousy arose concerning the priesthood and the tribes rebelled (stasiazouson) about who should be decorated with a glorified title.” 147 “It is better for a man to confess his transgressions than to harden his heart, as the hearts of those who rebelled (stasiazonton) against Moses, the servant of God, whose condemnation was made clear, for they went down alive to hell.” 148

The solution was that “you who have made the foundation of the revolt (staseōs) should submit to the authority of the elders and be educated in repentance, bending the knees of your hearts. Learn to submit, setting aside arrogance and pride.” 149 “Those who set themselves up as leaders of the apostasy (staseōs) and dissension ought to look to the common hope.” 150 If not, they should have left the church: “Let one say: If apostasy (stasis), and contention, and schism have come through me, I will depart. I will go wherever you wish, and I will do whatever is ordered by the congregation, just let the flock of Christ have peace with the properly appointed elders.” 151 The revolt at Corinth was started by rejecting the properly appointed leaders.

By What Authority?

As discussed above, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that one of the key issues with the Apostasy of the early Christian

144. 1 Clement 46:9.
145. 1 Clement 47:6.
146. 1 Clement 4:12.
147. 1 Clement 43:2.
148. 1 Clement 51:3–4.
149. 1 Clement 57:1–2.
150. 1 Clement 51:1.
151. 1 Clement 54:2.
Church is that the authority to act in the name of God in making covenants was lost. If, as we have seen, one of the key claims about the Apostasy concerns the authority to act in God’s name, then it is worth looking at the change in attitudes and understanding of authority among the ancient Christians.

One of the noteworthy things about Jesus, according to the Gospel writers, is that he had authority (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:36). Others posed him questions about where he received his authority (Matt. 21:23–27; Mark 11:28–33; Luke 20:2–8). His response was to demonstrate authority that they could see (performing miracles) to show that he also had authority over things that they could not see (forgiving sins) (Matt. 9:6; Mark 2:9–11; Luke 5:24). He could “command [epitassei] the unclean spirits with authority and they obey him” (Mark 1:27, my translation; Luke 4:36). He was given the authority to execute judgment (John 5:27), over all flesh (John 17:2), to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:18), and to grant eternal life (John 17:2).

What this authority meant is demonstrated in the words of the centurion: “I am also a man possessing authority (exousia), able to order (tassomenos) my own; I say to this one: Go, and he goes, and to another: Come, and he comes, and to my slave: Do this, and he does” (Matt. 8:9, my translation; Luke 7:8). The capability to order and put things in order was, to the centurion’s mind, authority.

During his mortal ministry, Jesus gave his Twelve Apostles “authority over unclean spirits so that they could cast them out and heal all sicknesses and all maladies” (Matt. 10:1, my translation; Mark 3:14–15; 6:7; Luke 9:1). He also gave them “authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and all the powers of the enemy” (Luke 10:19). He promised to give at least one of them authority that “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). He also gave the Seventy authority, and the devils submitted (hypotassetai) to them (Luke 10:17).

After his Atonement and Resurrection, Jesus was given “all authority in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18). He gave some of his authority to some of his disciples. Thus, he gave the Apostles authority to “make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and by teaching them to keep all things whatsoever I command you” (Matt. 28:16–20, my translation). They had authority to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:19). The authority to baptize, to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the authority to heal are things that we still recognize in the modern
Church. A later tradition specifies that he gave the Apostles this authority when “he laid his hands upon the holy apostles one by one.”\textsuperscript{152} The elders were given power to “pray over him [the sick], anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). The earliest Christians recognized that “there is no authority unless from God, the current authorities are ordered by God,” and therefore “every soul should submit to the higher authorities” (Rom. 13:1, my translation).

The earliest Christians were clear about authority and that they should submit (hypo\tau\sigma\sigma\epsilon\theta\theta\i\acute{a}) to authority (Titus 3:1). The Apostles had authority. The seven were also appointed by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:3–6), as were Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2–3).

At the beginning of the second century, however, things had changed. Who had authority in the early second century? The Twelve Apostles had been given the authority over the gospel.\textsuperscript{153} The Christians acknowledged that God “had given them [their ancestors (patrasin)] the authority over the kingdom . . . so that we may be subject to them.”\textsuperscript{154} The bishops, however, had no authority to organize the Church. Ignatius, the bishop of Smyrna, tells the Trallians, “I do not consider myself capable to organize you like an apostle.”\textsuperscript{155} It was a frank recognition that the Apostles held an authority which he, as bishop, did not.

In some things, God had authority that he had not given to men. In other things, authority that had once been had by the Apostles had returned to God. Jesus still had authority over repentance.\textsuperscript{156} God still had authority over all things.\textsuperscript{157} Even the power to heal, which God had once shared with men, had gone back to God.\textsuperscript{158}

In the late second century, a new line of argument came on the scene. Irenaeus of Lyon argued that there had been an apostolic succession. It was a “tradition which is from the apostles, which is preserved in the succession of presbyters in the Churches”\textsuperscript{159} or “by the succession of bishops.”\textsuperscript{160} It starts off well: “Having founded and built up the Church, therefore, the

\textsuperscript{152} Discourse on Abbaton fol. 6.
\textsuperscript{153} Barnabas 8:3.
\textsuperscript{154} 1 Clement 61:1.
\textsuperscript{155} Ignatius, Epistle to the Trallians 3:3.
\textsuperscript{156} Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans 4:1; Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates 4.3.5.
\textsuperscript{157} Martyrdom of Polycarp 2:1; Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates 4.1.11; Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 5.7.3.
\textsuperscript{158} Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates 4.1.11.
\textsuperscript{159} Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.2.2.
\textsuperscript{160} Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.2.
blessed apostles entrusted the work of the bishopric to Linus.”161 Later “Clement inherited the bishopric.”162 Unfortunately, the “apostolic tradition of the Church” consisted of teachings or preaching rather than authority.163 His argument was that “if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they taught the perfect separately and secretly from the rest, they would have passed them down to those to whom they entrusted the churches themselves.”164 As far as authority is concerned, for Irenaeus, Christ had authority165 and the Apostles had authority,166 but he mentions no one else who does.

What is absolutely clear from the early second-century Christians is that the Apostles had authority and they did not.

Church Organization at the End of the First Century

The sixth Article of Faith proclaims, “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth” (A of F 1:6). The Primitive Church refers to the Church of Jesus Christ that existed during the time that the New Testament was written. The organization that existed in the later Christian church was much different. To understand better the organization that existed in the Primitive Church before and the Christian Church afterwards, we should understand the organization that existed in the Church at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century. In that period, the organization is clear.

At the end of the first century, there are three offices in the Church: bishops, elders, and deacons. The terms presbyter and elder are synonymous, both rendering the Greek term presbyteros, one being a borrowing of the term and the other being a translation of it.

At the beginning of his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius lists the leadership of the church at Magnesia: “Damas, your godly bishop, and your worthy elders, Bassos and Apollonios, and my fellow servant, the deacon Zotion.”167 Magnesia had one bishop, two elders, and one deacon. We know of more than one deacon in Smyrna.168

161. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.3.
162. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.3.
163. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.3.
164. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.1.
165. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 1.27.4, 4.36.1
166. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 1.27.4.
What do holders of these various offices do in the church of the early second century?

The bishop was the highest officer left in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and thus should be obeyed.169 As a representative of God, the bishop stood in the place of God. The bishop, however, was a local officer without the authority to act outside of his jurisdiction, unlike the Apostles.170 For Ignatius, there was no longer a general Church organization or general Church officers; only the individual local units were left. The bishop was in charge of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper171 and baptism, and he presided over the meetings.172 Without the Apostles, it was the end.173 If the bishop was in the place of God, the elders were in the place of the Apostles.174 The elders thus acted as representatives of the bishop, perhaps counselors to him. They presided over the church (under the bishop).175 They were charged with visiting the sick, the widows, the orphans, and the poor and specifically converting those who were erring.176 They were tasked with admonishing church members.177 Deacons were entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.178 Nothing in the local church should be done without the bishop and the elders.179 “That was the ideal. The reality differed from the ideal. Ignatius claimed that those who acted in secret, hiding from the bishop, “worship the devil.”180 Clement said that some of the general Church in his day had revolted against the elders.181

The structure of the church at the end of the first century contrasts with the structure in the middle of the first century. In the middle of the first century, Christ “himself appointed some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11, my translation). The bishops and presbyters of the end of

177. 2 Clement 17:3.
181. 1 Clement 54:2.
the first century seem to match the pastors and teachers of the middle of the first century. The First Epistle of Peter equates the pastor (*poimena*) with bishop (*episkopon*, 1 Pet. 2:25). The offices seem to go from greatest to least in scope. Pastors and teachers were local leaders; apostles and prophets were over larger areas. The New Testament does not provide enough information to determine if an evangelist was local or regional.

What we see comparing the Church organization at the end of the first century with the middle of the first century is in some ways a streamlining of the organization but also an elimination of churchwide offices and an emphasis on local ones.

An examination of the Apostolic Fathers, that is, Christian writers who lived at the end of the first century and beginning of the second, indicates that (1) they were aware of apostasy occurring around them, (2) they recognized that they did not have the authority that the Apostles had earlier held, and (3) the structure of the Church had changed significantly from the time of the Apostles. All of these facts are consistent with the latter-day Church’s view of the falling away.

**Conclusions**

The term Great Apostasy has been used in the Church since at least 1842 and is still used in current Church materials. The position of the Church on the falling away or Apostasy is essentially unchanged since it was first taught by Joseph Smith at least as early as 1833. There is evidence that he was taught about it in the First Vision. It is also taught in the Book of Mormon. It was prophesied by Jesus Christ and is witnessed in the earliest Christian documents after the New Testament. Some contemporary scholarship also supports the Church’s teachings on this subject.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell once wrote of a gospel methodology for dealing with this particular topic:

> More and more, for instance, real scholarship will point to the validity of the dispensational view of God’s dealings with mankind from age to age. Early in this dispensation such ideas were utterly disregarded. Christianity preceded Christ in the sense that his work did not begin at once, in the meridian of time. His gospel and power and church have been on the earth at many points in history, and we should not be surprised to discover this fact in more and more ancient texts in the future. We shall also learn more and more about temple work’s having been practiced and understood periodically. There will be a convergence of discoveries (never enough, mind you, to remove the need for faith) to make plain and plausible what the modern prophets have been saying all along.
Latter-day Saint scholars will show the way by being able to read firsthand such ancient texts rather than relying on secondary scholarship, as was the case earlier in this dispensation. We will be able to reach such texts through a Latter-day Saint lens rather than relying solely upon able Protestant and Catholic scholars, of whom it is unfair to expect full sensitivity to the fulness of the gospel’s doctrines and ordinances.182

Few Latter-day Saint scholars have taken up Elder Maxwell’s challenge other than Hugh Nibley. An examination of the primary sources, however, shows that the early Christians were aware of a loss of authority that coincided with a loss of the Apostles. There was a rebellion (apostasy) against that authority and the teachings of the Church. It was prophesied by Jesus and the other New Testament writers. By the end of the century, Christian writers such as Clement and Ignatius described an Apostasy occurring. Early second-century writers like Hegessipus testified that it had occurred, and even Irenaeus in the second half of the second century testified that the Apostasy had taken place.

The fact of the Apostasy does not mean that everyone afterward who did the best that they could without authority or revelation was evil, or that there is nothing good to be found in those times. We need neither turn them into heroes nor villains; we could treat them as human beings while recognizing that they were—to use the Book of Mormon’s phrase—in “that awful state of blindness” (1 Ne. 13:32).

There is no intellectual reason to reject or change the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with respect to the falling away. They are intellectually defensible and account for the early Christian evidence as well as, or better than, any other theories. There is more work to be done, but work done along the lines that Elder Maxwell requested will be of more use to Latter-day Saints than redefining the falling away along the lines of recent work.

John Gee is the William “Bill” Gay Research Professor in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University.