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GONE. . !

WHY BELIEVERS LOSE THEIR FAITH AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO GUARD AGAINST IT

JOHN MARRIOTT

DEDICATION

To:

Dave "Renegade" Lawrence

In honor of 35 years of serving the Lord at
Camp Aush-Bik-Koong and showing campers and staff
what a life of faithful service to Jesus looks like.

And your friendship.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge those who shared their stories with me concerning their loss of faith. I appreciate their willingness to help me understand the reasons they no longer feel they can be Christians. I also want to thank my wife Nancy who patiently endured me working on this project. Her support of me is constant and her patience is eternal.

PREFACE

Writing about deconversion isn't fun. Hearing stories about how former believers lose their faith in Jesus is discouraging and at times challenging. I'd rather write about something more uplifting, like the Toronto Maple Leafs. If you know anything about the Toronto Maple Leafs and how depressing they are, then you know how discouraging writing about deconversion must be. But writing about why people lose their faith is much more important than writing about the Toronto Maple Leafs. In fact, writing about deconversion is very important, because if the message of the Bible is true, rejecting Christ has consequences, which last throughout eternity. That is far more disturbing than the futility displayed by the Maple Leafs, which only feels like it is lasting an eternity.

When people find out that my doctoral research was on deconversion they often ask me "So why do people lose their faith and become atheists?" There is no simple answer to that question. There are recurring themes in the stories that former believers tell about their deconversion, but usually it is a number of different

reasons set within a certain context, combined with personal and social factors that eventually tip the scales. Deconversion is never simple or straightforward and it defies neat explanations. It raises theological, psychological and sociological questions that we as Christians need to grapple with.

This book is a minor attempt to do that. During my doctoral studies I interviewed 30 former believers, read dozens of books and nearly one hundred online deconversion narratives. Some of what I discovered is contained in the following chapters. There you will encounter the major reasons that I discerned from the data for why former believers lost their faith. And by "believers" I am speaking sociologically not theologically. I use the term "believer" to describe those individuals who made a profession of faith in Christ at one point in their life and identified with a church community. These are individuals who identified as Christians and claimed to have taken their faith seriously. I am not passing judgment on whether such persons were regenerated, justified and genuine members of the body of Christ. As such, I am not entering into the debate of whether or not such people were once saved but have lost their salvation.

Although I think my conclusions presented in the following pages are valid, they are by no means the only reasons why people lose their faith. My research is not the first, last, or definitive word on the subject. But hopefully it will be helpful for those trying to understand why believers lose their faith and provide some helpful suggestions for guarding against it.

FARWELL TO FAITH

I spoke with the tongue of angels…but I still haven't
found what I'm looking for.

U2

Leap of Faith

In the spring of 1996, I was in the midst of a major personal struggle. Not with my faith but with landing the first phase of the triple jump. It seemed no matter what I tried I just couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong. The triple jump as the name implies, is one long jump comprised of three continuous phases. I love the triple jump. In fact, being a triple jumper formed the core of my identity throughout high school and college. It came easy to me, I had lots of success and it gave me confidence in myself.

Now, here I was, struggling just to make it into the sandpit. My problem was that I couldn't seem to figure out the continuous part. Every time I landed the first phase I couldn't launch into the second. I either broke down because my leg buckled under the pressure and didn't complete the jump, or I managed to hold it together and complete the jump but with meager results. What made my inability to perform the jump so frustrating and weighed so heavily on me is that at the time I was attending a top NCAA Division 1 track and field school on a scholarship. I was the guy they were giving a free education to in return for competitive results on the track and I wasn't holding up my end of the bargain. As the season progressed a crisis of sorts developed. I began to hate competing, doubted myself, and wanted to quit the team.

By March of that year things were coming to a head. We were in Tallahassee for the Florida State Relays and I was coming off my worst performance of the season a few days earlier in North Carolina. We arrived at Florida State one week before the meet, meaning I had seven days to fret about my upcoming and certain failure.

And then it happened. On a typical sunny, humid, Florida morning something happened that for me was so improbable that it felt like God had providentially ordered the events of the universe just for me. My teammate came running up to me and said, "Guess who's in the weight room?" I distinctly remember thinking to myself "Why is he asking me this question, I don't care. I don't even want to be here." But he was insistent. I guess he realized I wasn't in the mood to play along so he finally spilled the beans. "Jonathan Edwards is in the weight room!"

Now, for most people that name probably doesn't mean much and if it does it refers to the 18th century theologian. But for me, at that time in my life, Jonathan Edwards was my hero. The year before at the world track and field championships in Gothenburg Sweden, Edwards shattered the world record in the triple jump and in the process broke the 60-foot barrier with a jump of 18.29 meters. It was unbelievable, a superhuman performance. The next day I went to the mall and bought every British newspaper and tabloid I could get my hands on. He was on the cover of every single one.

Edwards immediately became the toast of the athletics world. He was named the track and field athlete of the year, and the BBC athlete of the year. But it wasn't just that he was a great triple jumper that made him my hero. It was that he was the world's greatest triple jumper *and* a very committed and well-respected Christian. In fact, prior to his breakthrough year in 1995, Edwards was better known for his strong religious convictions than his triple jumps. For a period of time he wouldn't even compete on Sundays because he wanted to honor God by attending church. He wouldn't compromise his belief on the matter even though it negatively affected his athletic success.

After winning the world championship the British press reported on him with a combination of adulation and bewilderment; adulation for his incredible jumping, bewilderment for his deep religious faith. One story I recall reading reported that Edwards was more comfortable in the athlete's village playing his guitar and leading worship choruses for the other Christian athletes than speaking to reporters about his athletic accomplishments. Edwards was the real deal. He walked the talk and he talked the walk. He was the closest thing

to Eric Liddell, - the beloved Scotch track and field champion who refused to run on Sunday - that Great Britain had seen since Eric Liddell himself. To sum it up, the British press was more impressed with the character of Edwards' life than they were with his incredible jumps.

Jonathan Edwards was everything I wanted to be but wasn't. I often thought about how much we had in common. We both were Christians, we both were serious about our faith, we both occasionally preached in churches, we both loved the triple jump and he even went through a major slump when he struggled with his jumping just like me. Even though we had never met I felt a kinship with him, like we would be friends if we ever did meet.

As my performance steadily declined in the winter of 1996, I remember thinking that if there was one person who I wished I could talk to about my struggles on the track and the frustration of not being able to meet the team's expectations it would have been Jonathan Edwards. He was a solid Christian a great triple jumper and he knew the frustration of going through a slump. I

never prayed and asked God to meet Edwards, that would have been asking too much, but I certainly prayed about my struggle and asked God to help me jump farther.

So, you can imagine my shock when I heard that Jonathan Edwards, the one person in the whole world who I thought could speak to my situation, was in the weight room at Florida State University. What were the odds? He was from England, I was from Canada and somehow out of all the running tracks in the world we both happened to be at the same one at the same time, a time that was so significant in my life.

To make a long story short, Jonathan Edwards and I connected. I shared with him a bit of my story and he invited me out for lunch. We talked about the triple jump, God, theology, my struggles, and the upcoming Olympics. I met his lovely wife Alison and his coach who gave me some pointers. It was awesome.

I wish I could say that on the day I met Jonathan Edwards my triple jump problems were solved and my frustration evaporated. Neither happened. But something better happened. That day God showed me in a way

uniquely meaningful to me that he loved me. Even if I didn't overcome my inability to land the first phase of the triple jump, I knew God had saw my situation - which in the big picture was pretty insignificant - and he had compassion on me.

Four years later Edwards won the gold medal at the Sydney Olympics. In 2001 I traveled to Edmonton to watch him compete in the world championships, which he won with a massive jump. I sat right behind his coach, the same one who I had lunch with five years before.

Edwards retired in 2003, and began hosting *Songs of Praise*, the long running Sunday morning television show that presents Christian hymns. He was the poster boy for Christianity in England, and without a doubt the most famous Christian in all of Great Britain.

Today, Jonathan Edwards is an atheist.

In February of 2007, Edwards lost his faith. "I just stopped believing in God," said Edwards, "I don't go to church anymore, not at all." He went on to say "I don't miss my faith. In many ways I feel more settled and happier in myself without it."

When I read that Edwards had deconverted I was beyond shocked. I was bewildered, confused, depressed and could not understand how my hero, the guy who I had lunch with, the guy who God used to show me he cared, was no longer a believer. I truly couldn't wrap my head around it. It still deeply bothers me. I pray that he returns to his faith but twelve years on he shows no sign of changing his mind.

Although Jonathan Edwards' story is shocking, sadly it is not all that uncommon. People who once professed allegiance to Jesus can and do renounce their faith. In fact, Edwards is just the tip of the iceberg. Former pastors, missionaries, worship leaders, evangelists, apologists and others once in full-time Christian ministry, today identify among the godless. Researching deconversion online produces thousands, if not tens of thousands of deconversion "testimonies" of former Christians who have walked away from a faith they once claim to have deeply been committed to.

The fact that both Christians in the ministry and Christians in the pew no longer find Christianity true and reject their faith raises two difficult questions:

- What are some of the reasons people lose their faith?

- What can be done to guard against deconversion?

In the following chapters I will look at five reasons that contribute to deconversion. These reasons are not exhaustive, and they are not offered by all deconverts as causal factors in their loss of faith. Nevertheless, they are frequently mentioned in many deconversion narratives and that makes them worth our attention. Each chapter below addresses a specific problem former believers have offered as a reason for their loss of faith. I then offer some thoughts about how Christians can constructively engage the objections. I want to be clear; I am not offering answers to problems. I am merely offering what I think are helpful responses and suggestions. There are no "answers" to the phenomenon of deconversion because deconversion is about people, not math problems. The loss of faith is a personal crisis that impacts people to their core, not an abstract philosophical problem. Because deconversion is about people it is complicated, messy and resists easy answers.

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THE BIBLE STANDS?

*Properly read, the Bible is the greatest force for atheism
ever conceived.*

Isaac Asimov

Two Factors

I t is difficult to say just what causes a person to lose
their faith and leave their Christian community.
Each person is different and just as each of us has
our own reasons for believing in Jesus, deconverts have
theirs for no longer being able to maintain belief.
However, there are two major contributing factors that
seem to consistently accompany the loss of faith:
intellectual doubts and emotional hurts.

Intellectual Factors

Intellectual factors play a role in all deconversions. Not all deconversions are initiated by intellectual problems with Christianity. Emotional wounds initiate some. But regardless of what the initial catalyst is every story retelling the loss of faith will include intellectual problems with Christianity that cannot be overcome. Ultimately the problems reached a tipping point, a critical mass, forcing a person to either attempt to maintain faith in something they find no longer true, or in the name of intellectual integrity give up their faith. Three significant intellectual challenges that contribute to deconversion are the following: perceived problems with the Bible, Darwinian evolution, and the influence of other atheists.

The Bible

A recurring refrain among former Christians is that one of the things that initiated their deconversion was picking up the Bible and reading it for themselves. Upon doing so they encountered what they perceived as contradictions, immoral actions sanctioned by God and utterly fantastic stories they just could not believe. For

example, the first two chapters of the Bible contain what many take to be two separate and contrary accounts of creation. Immediately on the heels of that are stories of a talking animal, magic trees, genealogies which include individuals living over 900 years and mythical beings which appear to be the result of women having intercourse with angels! Read a bit further and God tells Abraham to kill his son and offer him as a sacrifice and then commands Joshua to slaughter all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

Admittedly, if this were any other religion these stories would undoubtedly strike us as clearly mythical or disturbingly violent. So, before we are too critical of deconverts we need to try and see the stories of the Bible afresh in order to critically think through what we believe. I think there are critical, yet faithful readings of the books of Genesis and Joshua that can stand up to scrutiny. They are not however, the readings which most Christians are presented with in their church. I wonder how many deconverts seek such readings. In my experience with former believers it seems that they are precluded from looking for those kinds of faithful/critical readings due to

a deeply held, yet often unconscious assumption, of what it means for the Bible to be the word of God.

In the case of many deconverts a certain understanding of the doctrine of inerrancy set them up for a crisis of faith. Believing that "if there is even one mistake in the Bible it cannot be the word of God", they had a choice to make when they encountered what they believed were clear errors. Ironically, for many it was the high value that their Christian upbringing placed on truth that contributed to their loss of faith. Finding what they took to be errors in the Bible, along with a rigid view of inerrancy and the belief that one should believe the truth regardless of the consequences proved to be too much. One woman shared with me that:

> When you come up fundamentalist, there are no contradictions in the Bible. It's the perfect word of God. And if you see a contradiction, it's because you read it wrong.

That's one possibility. But numerous deconverts were willing to countenance another option. They were willing to ask, "What if the problem I have encountered is not with my reading but with the Bible itself?"

Steve, the son of a prominent evangelical leader, was powerfully impacted by his discovery of what he "knew to be a contradiction" in the Bible. He estimated that, growing up, he had "read the Bible 20 times cover to cover." Nevertheless, while at a Christian liberal arts college, he came across what he called, "the contradiction." As he read through the Bible, he encountered what for him was an irresolvable problem, and he was "floored." He decided to turn a critical eye back to the Bible and began to reread it. He "took 3 months and went through it again," and by the time he had finished, he estimated that he "had 40 pages of a notebook filled" with contradictions and difficulties.

Whether Steve found 40 pages of genuinely difficult Bible problems can be debated. One thing is certain; in his mind they were difficulties that could not be overcome and that disqualified the Bible from being the word of God. But might it just be the case that a large number of those difficulties rested on questionable assumptions Steve had about the Bible that set him up for a crisis of faith? Might it also be true that given what he was taught about the Bible he could have come to no other conclusion?

Suggestion

After listening to and reading many deconversion stories it becomes apparent that one of the expectations many deconverts had of the Bible - and which in their eyes it did not meet - was that it had to be inerrant. This isn't at all surprising given the fact that many deconverts leave churches that are situated somewhere on the continuum between fundamentalist and conservative evangelical. In the environments in which their faith was shaped, belief in inerrancy was a fundamental of the faith. In fact, many deconverts report that they were taught that if they were to have any confidence in the doctrine of the Trinity and the resurrection of Christ, the Bible had to be inerrant. If the Bible was wrong about a fact of geography, then what confidence could they have it wasn't wrong on doctrinal matters as well? The reasoning behind this conclusion is as follows:

1. God inspired the Bible.

2. <u>God cannot make a mistake.</u>

3. Therefore, the Bible is totally without error of any kind.

It follows then, if there is even one single error in the Bible it cannot be inspired by God and if God did not inspire it, then it is not the word of God. Let's call this argument The Single Error Argument.

If the Single Error Argument were the only option for understanding the nature of Scripture, then the discovery of an error in the Bible should lead one to renounce their belief that the Bible is the word of God. However, it is not the only option. Another option is to question what is being assumed about what inspiration demands. Rather than jettisoning a belief in the Bible because one is convinced they have uncovered an error in the text it might be helpful to ask, "What am I assuming about the premise 'God inspired the Bible?'" If one does this, I expect that they will find that operating under the surface is an assumption that inspiration must preclude error. But does inspiration entail that the Bible must be free of all error? That's a tricky question and one on which Christians can and do differ. There are many godly Christians who do not believe that inspiration demands inerrancy and yet still maintain a deep conviction that the Bible is God's word. That being the case, finding an error in the Bible would only require one to abandon their faith

if they were committed to the underlying assumptions of the Single Error Argument as it relates to inspiration. But doesn't it make more sense to question one's assumption about what inspiration entails and revise that in light of the discovery of an error, as opposed to the drastic step of denying the Faith altogether? Maintaining faith then becomes a matter of revising one's assumptions about an important, but nonessential doctrine (inspiration) in terms of salvation. I trust that this is a better option than the all or nothing ultimatum that the Single Error Argument demands. However, this option never seems to occur to those who lost their faith because it was never presented to them as an acceptable choice.

It doesn't take long for the reflective reader to begin to feel the tension between the Single Error Argument and how the Bible actually behaves. The Bible is a complex, messy book that comes to us from the ancient past. It has, on the surface at least, passages that do not cohere well with each other. There are problem passages that theologians have been unable to reconcile to the satisfaction of everyone. There are even copyist errors that have crept into the copies of the Bible we read from every Sunday. That being the case, it is shooting

oneself in the foot to offer a simplistic take on inerrancy and then make inerrancy an apologetic for the supernatural character of the Bible. By claiming that the reason the Bible is inerrant is because it is inspired is to say not only that it is trustworthy because it is from God, but that you can know it is from God because it is without error. Doing that puts one in the difficult position of having to refute all claims of error in order to not only maintain that the Bible is inspired but that it is God's word in the first place. Scottish theologian James Orr, put it this way:

> It is urged...that unless we can demonstrate what is called inerrancy of the Biblical record down to even the minutest details, the whole edifice of belief in revealed religion falls to the ground. This, on the face of it, is the most suicidal position for any defender of religion to take up.

Let me be clear. The problem is not with the Bible, or even the doctrine of inerrancy per se. It is with an inadequate understanding of inerrancy that is often reduced to the Single Error Argument. Unfortunately, an inadequate understanding of inerrancy is what most

believers have. I am not being critical of the majority of Christians for their lack of understanding about inerrancy. In fact, unless they were to spend considerable time studying it, that's about the only view they could have given the complexity of the doctrine.

The doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture is complex and requires time and a fair bit of theological savvy to gain an understanding of what the doctrine actually is. If one does investigate the doctrine it becomes apparent that what inerrancy actually means is so nuanced that it is in danger of dying the death of a thousand qualifications. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy – the definitive statement on the doctrine – has 19 articles explaining what inerrancy actually means. The combined force of the 19 articles is such that actually proving an error is nearly impossible. And when all is said and done, inerrancy only applies to the originals, which we don't have.

What we do have are reliable copies of the original manuscripts, but which do have discrepancies and contradictions in them. Even the most conservative evangelical scholars like Gleason Archer and Norman

Geisler recognize that the text we have today includes at the very least scribal errors. For instance, 1 Kings 4:26 says that Solomon had 40,000 stalls for his horses but 2 Chronicles 9:25 says he had only 4000. Geisler's solution is to confidently assert "This is undoubtedly a copyist error." This is likely true, but for those who have an inadequate understanding of inerrancy and subscribe to the simplistic Single Error Argument, it's still a contradiction in the Bible, the inerrant, no mistakes Bible.

Of course, the response to this is to say that the error is only in the copy we have but not in the original and it's only the originals that are inerrant. Even if true that response is unhelpful for two reasons. First, the average young believer (high school / college student), has been told that the Bible is without error, but they have never been schooled in the intricacies of the doctrine of inerrancy. All they know is the Single Error Argument. Then they find out there are errors in the text they have in their hands. Cue a crisis of faith.

The second reason is, the claim that inerrancy only applies to the originals is, even if true, not falsifiable. Actually, investigating whether the originals are without

error can never occur because we don't have them. So, while I understand the theological value of having the conviction the originals were inerrant, it does not help assuage the crisis of faith brought on by what appear to be actual errors in the text. In faith we may choose to believe there were no errors in the originals, but that is based on a theological assumption of what inspiration entails not on an inductive investigation of the Bible itself.

When people who have assumed the Single Error Argument of inspiration come across what appears to be an error, or an actual error (scribal mistakes in the copies), they can experience major theological vertigo. A new Single Error Argument may replace the old Single Error Argument. The new one is:

1. If the Bible has even one error, it can't be the word of God.

2. <u>The Bible does have at least one error.</u>

3. Therefore, the Bible can't be the word of God.

Stories of former believers reveal that it is a small step from adopting the above argument to leaving the Faith.

How can we respond? In my opinion there are two options for dealing with the issue of apparent problems with Scripture if we want to avoid setting up believers for a crisis of faith. First, if one is committed to the doctrine of inerrancy, they must articulate it accurately. It is not enough to say, "The Bible is the word of God and therefore contains no errors." The doctrine of inerrancy must be defined and explained in a robust manner. Nothing less will do. It is a disservice to those we teach to proclaim that the Bible is inerrant without offering them a thorough explanation of what is meant by inerrant.

The second approach is to stop using talk of inerrancy altogether. This isn't as radical as it may sound. Perhaps instead of saying what the Bible isn't we should say what the Bible is, which is trustworthy in what it teaches. Even if there are errors in the originals or copies concerning certain claims that doesn't mean that its message isn't trustworthy. Errors in the originals might be a problem for a certain view of inspiration, but not for the trustworthiness of what the Bible teaches. It simply does not follow that if the original manuscripts had an error in them that we have no reason to trust what the

Bible says when it tells us Jesus rose from the dead. If we found an error in a copy of USA Today, we wouldn't say "Well, I guess I can't believe anything in here anymore." likewise with the Bible. Undoubtedly, USA Today doesn't claim to be inspired by God, and that is a big difference between the Bible and a newspaper. But unless one requires inspiration entail inerrancy, the analogy holds. The analogy only fails if one assumes that inspiration entails inerrancy but that begs the very question under discussion. Therefore, even if one were to find an error in the text, it shouldn't lead them to deny their faith. The text can still be not only reliable but the word of God if it contains an error. Only if one is unflinchingly committed to the Single Error Argument should it lead to a denial of the Faith. But isn't a more reasonable course of action to question the assumptions underlying the Single Error Argument than to renounce one's commitment to Christ?

Coming to the Bible with expectations that it may not be meant to bear can cause a crisis of faith. One of those expectations is that it will be without error of *any* kind (scribal, copyist etc.). Another is that the Bible must conform to our understanding of what inspiration has to entail. Having those expectations unmet by the Bible can

be devastating. However, instead of throwing away our confidence in the Bible as the word of God, we should rethink our expectations of it.

Many folks who lose their faith attribute it to the fact that the Bible had errors in it. If so, it could not be the word of God. That being the case they either had to ignore what they discovered about the Bible and try to keep believing despite the fact that Bible did not live up to their expectations or stop believing in the Bible. Believing something you don't find to be the truth is pretty difficult. Perhaps if they had a more robust view of what inerrancy means rather than the Single Error Argument they could have authentically continued to believe. Or if they had been willing to question their assumptions of what inspiration entails, they could have done so rather than taking the drastic step of committing apostasy.

On a personal note: I do not deny inerrancy. On the contrary I affirm it with proper qualifications. I agree with Clark Pinnock who says:

> Inerrancy is not, to be quite frank, an ideal term
> to say what needs to be said. This is chiefly

because it connotes in many people's minds a modern, scientific precision that the Bible does not display.

I also agree with Scot McKnight who cashes out the doctrine this way:

> I have for years said the first and leading word for Scripture needs to be truth. I stand by it and it puts the entire inerrancy discussion into a larger context...The word we ought to be fastening onto is the word truth. The Bible is true and God calls us to listen and to learn and to live what God speaks to us from the true word of God. This posture of listen-to-the-truth before the Bible does not determine a hermeneutic but invites us to listen until we discern the hermeneutic needed for the various texts...My contention is fairly simple and straightforward: we ought to let all the evidence determine what a text is actually saying and doing and not our assumptive readings. Which means no term other than "true" ought to shape our hermeneutic. The word "true" is bigger than the word "inerrant." In fact, "true" is the

emperor of all biblical hermeneutics. The term "inerrancy" too often usurps the word "true" and the Bible loses...A biblical view of inerrancy demotes it under the word true, all as part of God's choice to communicate efficiently and sufficiently. When the word "true" governs the game it's a brand new, healthy game.

EVOLVING OUT OF FAITH

There is no refutation of Darwinian evolution in existence. If a refutation were to come about, it would come from a scientist and not an idiot.

Richard Dawkins

Evolution = Atheism?

Richard Dawkins is many things, professor, author, pundit, and activist. However, one thing he is not, is at a loss for words when it comes to his feelings on the relationship between science and religion. Dawkins is vehement in his attack on religious faith, pulling no punches and taking no prisoners. The above quote directed at a Christian evangelist tells you what he thinks of religious people; they are idiots. And while he may be the loudest of Christianity's critics he is not alone in his views. In fact, at

leading research institutes like Harvard 37% of professors are either atheists or agnostics. In the psychology and biology departments that number rises to 61%. That shouldn't be a surprise given that both departments operate on Darwinian evolutionary presuppositions. Dawkins and many of his colleagues assume that if evolution is a fact then God does not exist. In their minds' Darwinian evolution removes any rational grounds for the existence of God because he is unnecessary to account for life. Convinced that Darwinian evolution is beyond dispute, atheism is their only reasonable conclusion. Consequently, theistic religions are necessarily false and the texts upon which they are founded are myths. Myths now debunked by the only true means of reliable knowledge, science.

Darwinian evolution is so pervasive in higher education that regardless of how well it is supported evidentially it is the ruling dogma. This raises two problematic questions for Christians matriculating their way through college. First, they must face the question "Is evolution true?" and second, "If so, what does it mean for the Christian faith?" I am not a physical scientist and although I am not persuaded by the arguments made by

evolutionists, I am equally unpersuaded by the argument that if evolution is true the conclusion that God is dead and Christianity is false, follows. Yet, it is precisely that assumption that deconverts often harbored and which played a significant role in their deconversion.

Darwinian Evolution

A significant contributing factor reported by many who have lost their faith is Darwinian evolution. By Darwinian evolution I mean the process whereby one species evolves into another over long periods of time as a result of genetic mutations which prove to be advantageous for survival and reproduction. This process is by definition undirected without any foresight or intention and necessarily precludes any input from God.

Arguably, evolution per se does not rule out the existence of God. In fact, evolution only occurs once life exists, which leaves the door open a crack for God to play an explanatory role. God, it may be argued is required to explain "first life." However, it is assumed by nearly all Darwinists that science will eventually slam that door shut by providing an account of how inorganic chemicals combined to create life by way of entirely

natural processes. According to naturalists (those who reject any supernatural entities) the evidence for evolution has made God unnecessary to account for the existence of species and as science progresses God will be unnecessary to account for the origin of life.

The above thinking dominates higher education and makes it very difficult to be taken seriously at college as both an intelligent person and a creationist. It is even more difficult to rebut the arguments offered in favor of evolution. The majority of Christian college students enter college with the assumption that evolution and Christianity are incompatible. Once at college they are presented with persuasive arguments on behalf of the theory of evolution. Unable to intelligently dialogue on the theory of evolution from a dissenting point of view it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain belief in the existence of God. One former believer shared with me that "understanding evolution was the biggest thing" in her loss of faith. She is not alone.

Suggestion

Part of the reason why learning about the theory of evolution has such a negative impact on some

Christians is that like inerrancy, they often hold to assumptions about evolution and creation that set them up for a crisis of faith. Nearly all of the folks I am acquainted with and many of the narratives I have read which credit evolution as a catalyst for their deconversion have the same underlying assumption. Ironically it is the same assumption that Richard Dawkins holds.

Like Dawkins, they believe that evolution is necessarily anti-theistic. In other words, evolution and God cannot possibly coexist with one another. Therefore, if evolution is true, God does not exist. But this is simply a false assumption that needs to be questioned. The assumption that believing in God is incompatible with evolution is based on a particular reading of Scripture. It assumes that when Genesis speaks of God creating living organisms it necessarily rules out evolution. God in the creation account speaks into existence all living things except for Adam, who he creates specially out of the dust of the ground. There is no hint of species evolving slowly over long periods of time.

Admittedly, evolution does pose a problem but only for a *certain* reading of Genesis, one that tries to

harmonize the Bible and science. And Scripture poses a problem for evolution but only for a *certain* version of evolution, Darwinian evolution. But there are other alternative readings of Scripture that would allow one to hold to their belief in God and also accept evolution as the process, which God used.

Of course, belief in God is incompatible with Darwinian evolution because Darwinian evolution is necessarily undirected and purposeless. But Darwinian evolution is not the only version of the evolutionary hypothesis. There is no logical contradiction between the existence of God and the process of evolution as long as God directed the process toward his intended ends. Although I may not like it and it will cause me to reevaluate some of my other theological beliefs, that is a far less radical option than jettisoning belief in God altogether. If I become convinced of evolution then perhaps I may need to adopt a different reading of Genesis, one that allows for God to have used evolution to bring about his intended purposes.

One possible alternative way to read Genesis is to give up on the assumption that the Genesis account of

creation needs to be brought into harmony with contemporary science. Why do we have to assume that it does? I don't think we need to and in fact I think it would be better if we don't. There are two reasons why doing so may prove to be beneficial. First, harmonizing the creation accounts in Genesis with contemporary science proves to be a very difficult task. If we insist on taking the first chapter of Genesis literally, it is literally impossible to harmonize it with contemporary science. If we understand Genesis chapter one as a figurative account, it is only slightly less difficult to harmonize the text with contemporary science. So why do we spend so much time trying to do so? I think because what underwrites both attempts at harmonization is the belief that if Genesis is true, what it records must not only correspond to reality but do so in a particular manner.

As far back as the ancient Greeks, truth has been understood as a correspondence relationship between a belief and reality. If I believe that there is a cat sitting on my sofa and as it turns out there is in fact a cat on the sofa, my belief corresponds with reality and is therefore true. And while the correspondence relationship defines what truth is, the question remains as to what it means

for a belief to correspond to reality. The assumption of some people who have lost their faith (not to mention many Christians), is that the correspondence relationship needs to be of a certain nature.

What needs to be brought out into the light and exposed is the assumption of what the correspondence relationship must be. As it turns out the assumption is a distinctly modern one that is foreign to the context of the ancient world. Admittedly, the text of Genesis must correspond to reality in order to be true, but what does that correspondence have to look like? For moderns, what it means for something to correspond to reality is quite specific. Correspondence in this sense is a one to one equivalence between the facts of reality and our beliefs, and what determines the facts of reality is science. Science supposedly tells us what facts are and if our beliefs are in accordance with what science says, then our beliefs are true. So, the underlying assumption is that for Genesis to be a true account of the creation of the world it must be scientifically accurate.

This leads to the conclusion that since Genesis is not scientifically accurate it is not a true account of the

creation of the world. But Genesis was not written to us. Rather, it was written to an ancient pre-scientific culture, a culture that was perfectly comfortable with true accounts of reality being conveyed by the figurative and symbolic. When we assume that the creation account must correspond in some way to the facts of contemporary science, we force onto the creation story a modern notion of what truthful communication must consist in. Genesis does speak truthfully, but in a fashion that was meaningful to those to whom it was originally written. When we forget that and assume that it must correspond to the facts of science, we run the risk of a crisis of faith.

In my opinion, a careful reading of Genesis reveals that it is not primarily concerned with conveying accurate historical facts about *how* God created the world, let alone scientific facts. Rather, it performs the *function* of teaching the ancient Israelites truths about God, the world and humanity by utilizing a contemporary vehicle that was very familiar to them. The ancient Israelites' creation account in the first chapters of Genesis is remarkably similar to those of the nations around them. When one compares the creation accounts of the

Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Canaanites what they will find is tremendous parallels, not only among those accounts but also the book of Genesis.

One way to make sense of the similarities is to believe that God chose to communicate to an ancient people in a way that was familiar to them, an ancient way. In doing so he appropriated common creation myths but changed vital aspects of them in order to teach important truths. If this is the case, then there is no need to harmonize Genesis with contemporary science because God never intended to teach historical or scientific facts by the creation account. Genesis' original audience was ancient tribal people, not 21st century scientists. That being the case we should not be surprised that God was not telling them truths that correspond with contemporary science and we should not expect the Bible to be scientifically accurate. Nonetheless God did tell them truths about the world in a manner that was meaningful to them. We should not blame Genesis for not doing something it was never intended to do.

If this is true then there is no reason why, even if evolution is a fact, that one need abandon their belief in

God. Why? Because if Genesis is not intending to teach historical, scientific facts then even if evolution is the case there is no contradiction with what the Bible teaches. Only when one assumes that God and evolution cannot co-exist, that a certain reading of the text must be the correct reading and that science and the Bible need to be harmonized, do problems arise.

My suggestion is that we rethink our assumptions about the creation account, science, evolution and God. This does not mean that we must accept evolution as the means by which God created species. I personally am agnostic about how God created. I am not persuaded by the evolutionary account even if I am willing to allow that God could have used it as the process by which he created species because I have yet to see persuasive evidence in support of it. But by approaching the creation account in the way I have briefly sketched above, even if I do become convinced of the truth of evolution it will not cause me to doubt the truth of the Bible or the existence of God.

For some folks the literal reading of Genesis poses no problems. I am happy for them and have no

desire to challenge their thinking. I am not advocating theistic evolution, old earth creationism or any particular reading of the text. I only maintain that for some folks having to read Genesis under the weight of the aforementioned assumptions proves too much. Faced with having to question the assumptions they have about the creation account or abandon their faith they all too often never consider questioning their assumptions. Perhaps if we considered questioning some of those assumptions it would alleviate the tensions that lead to loss of faith.

INTERNET ATHEISM

On the Internet Christianity is losing by a long shot.

Hemant Mehta

Atheists

A significant number of deconverts mention the works of the New Atheists as being meaningful in their journeys to atheism. The New Atheists are a cadre of authors from different backgrounds who are united in their disbelief in the existence of God and in their convictions that religion is a force for evil that should be abandoned for the good of all. Their scathing critiques of arguments for the existence of God and withering criticisms of religion have earned them a wide hearing in a post-September 11th world. The most influential of the New Atheists are sometimes

known as the Four Horsemen: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris.

Statistics show that unbelief in America is growing. Not all unbelievers are atheists however, a growing number of Americans identify as simply nonreligious. The New Atheists are surely part of the reason for that increase. What may be having an even greater impact on the rise of unbelief than the books and movies of prominent atheists like Dawkins is the access millions of people now have to the Internet. The Internet is the great equalizer when it comes to providing atheists with a platform to communicate their message.

Christianity in the West, especially in North America has had the benefit of a deeply entrenched social and cultural infrastructure by which it has effectively communicated the message of the gospel. Think about it for a minute, churches in the United States and Canada are ubiquitous, Christian bookstores that provide apologetics and evangelistic literature are only slightly less ubiquitous. Christian radio and television stations fill the airways with evangelistic and apologetic preaching. Evangelical publishing houses churn out books on

apologetics and a large number of high-profile apologetic ministries provide believers and unbelievers reasons why Christianity is true.

Contrast that with the atheist infrastructure. Atheists tend to be isolated individuals who do not belong to anything resembling a church community. Until recently there were few atheist social groups and even fewer atheist activist groups. There are no atheist bookstores to speak of, an insignificant number of atheist radio programs and fewer still atheist radio stations or networks. As far as I know there is only one atheist television station. Up until recently the number of secular publishing houses could be counted on one hand.

All of this has made the progress of atheism rather pedestrian. If one never encounters arguments against the existence of God, then perhaps one never experiences serious doubts and remains a believer. Likewise, if a believer never experiences atheist counter apologetics that attempt to refute and undercut the arguments of Christian apologetics their confidence in the Christian faith will likely remain high. For the last 50 years Christians had a bevy of apologetic resources at their

fingertips and almost zero access to any counter arguments. This produced a certain amount of false confidence. It is amazing to discover how many former believers identified as "former apologists" for the Faith before deconverting. What caused them to lose their faith? They finally encountered objections from intelligent atheists who challenged many of the apologetic arguments they had so much confidence in.

They didn't encounter atheist counter arguments by stumbling into an atheist social group meeting in the basement of the local library, or by finding an atheist bookstore, or even by hearing an atheist radio program. They encountered the arguments on the Internet. The Internet has changed everything for atheism. It provides not only a platform for atheists to advance their worldview but also form virtual communities. Dan Gilgoff, religion editor at CNN.com says that,

> the Internet has become the de facto global church for atheists, agnostics and other doubters of God, who of course don't have bricks-and-mortar churches in which to congregate.

Hemant Mehta, known online as the Friendly Atheist

agrees:

> Until the Internet came along, we didn't have our
> version of [church]. Now that we have a space
> where we can talk about our (lack of) religious
> beliefs, it's that much easier to communicate our
> views.

And atheists are effectively doing just that. There are literally hundreds if not thousands of atheist websites. Many are dedicated to refuting Christian apologetics. Some focus on problems with the Bible, others with philosophical objections, still others the negative impact of Christianity. Many are the product of former believers seeking to deconvert Christians. Some websites are unsophisticated attacks on Christianity. Others are highly sophisticated counter attacks made by well informed, highly educated skeptics.

Mitch, a former believer who shared his story with me offered the following observations about the importance and influence of the Internet on his deconversion:

> I think Dan Dennett is the one [who] thinks the
> Internet will completely change the future. I feel

that the Internet has opened and raised my consciousness to a point that I have very different priorities on what's important, as opposed to what I did before I had this information. The Internet started opening my eyes that the atheist movement had been out there.

Brandon Peach at *RELEVANT* magazine noted that on Hemant Mehta's website a question in the forums asked if former believers would have left their faith if the Internet didn't exist. A significant number said they would not have. This is supported by the April 2014 MIT Technological Review entitled "How the Internet is Taking Away America's Religion: Using the Internet Can Destroy Your Faith." The article highlighted the findings of an Olin College of Engineering professor, Allen Downey, who correlated the sharp decline in religious affiliation with the rise of Internet use. Allen argued that between 1990-2010 the number of Americans with no religious affiliation went up from 8% to 18%. That corresponds to about 25 million people who no longer consider themselves religious. The article points out that "in the 1980s, Internet use was essentially zero, but in 2010, 53% of the population spent two hours per week

online and 25% surfed for more than 7 hours. This increase closely matches the decrease in religious affiliation.

Social websites like Facebook make it possible to communicate and form meet-up groups that never could have existed prior to the world wide web. The reason why is that it provides an opportunity for atheists - who are relatively small in number compared with the general population - to find each other and form communities for support and encouragement. "A lot of millennials who are coming of age have found that the Internet is a fantastic place to talk about their doubt," says Jesse Galef, communications director for the Secular Student Alliance. "Before the Internet, there was no place for young people to do that. The only place to go was really church, and that wasn't always a welcoming place."

Some of these communities are live, in person meet-ups with local atheists who have met online. Others remain virtual, but no less significant for those who find in them a measure of solidarity that otherwise was absent in their life. In fact, Brandon Peach reports that:

The web's largest atheist forum is a subcommunity of the social media site Reddit, launched in 2005. Its Alexa traffic ranking puts it in the top 50 sites in the United States with 2 million unique visitors per month, many of those to its "Atheist" subcommunity of 154,000. The Christian "subreddit," a devoted group comprised largely of recovering evangelicals with a zeitgeist-oriented view of Scripture, enjoys less than a tenth of the atheists' readership.

Prior to the Internet if one wanted to find counter arguments to the Christian faith, they had to look hard in order to find them. Today, those arguments are as close at hand as the laptop on your desk, the tablet in your living room and the phone in your pocket. The case for atheism is only a click away. Josh McDowell is correct when he laments that,

> the Internet has given atheists, agnostics, skeptics, the people who like to destroy everything that you and I believe, the almost equal access to your kids as your youth pastor and you have… whether you like it or not.

As more and more believers are exposed through the Internet to the counter apologetics of atheists and the case they make against the existence of God there will inevitably be a rise in rates of deconversion from Christianity.

Suggestion

What are Christians to do with the influence of atheism on the Internet? An initial response may be that we should discourage Christians from looking at websites that are threatening. But hiding from the challenge of atheism does not produce a robust faith. In fact, what it tends to do is set people up for future disaster. Sheltering believers from challenges is unhealthy. On the other hand, feasting on atheist apologetics is equally unhealthy, in fact it's probably worse. There needs to be wise guides shepherding Christian young people as they encounter Internet atheism. Otherwise, for some it can destroy their faith.

There is a common theme that runs through the stories of former believers for whom confidence in the truthfulness of Christianity rests heavily on apologetic arguments. They tend to experience a crisis of faith when

they encounter online atheist apologetic counter arguments. Multiple deconverts have shared with me that they considered themselves amateur apologists prior to their deconversion. Then they came across counter arguments online. They were deeply troubled by what they read and found the atheist objections compelling. They eventually went on to lose their faith and now they are amateur apologists for atheism.

What can we do to stem that tide? Here are three practical suggestions to remind believers of as they encounter online atheist apologetics.

First, relax. Although there are lots of websites offering counter arguments and attacking the case for Christianity there is no need to panic. I remember when I first encountered a website that appeared to me to level a very damaging charge against the reliability of the New Testament. To say the least, I was very troubled. It caused me a lot of anxiety and I wondered, "What if it's true?" I had never come across the information before and I was unaware of any responses to it. Looking back, I realize that I overreacted. There were responses; I just needed to find them.

Second, it is helpful to acknowledge that online atheist apologists do appear to have powerful arguments against Christianity. They do offer a different and challenging perspective on the data. They argue against Christianity by raising objections and counter arguments that many apologetically minded believers have never encountered before. This can be mind blowing for believers who have never experienced any doubts about their faith. However, what needs to be said is that atheist apologetics look impressive largely due to the fact that Christian apologetics has never had to play defense in the way the Internet is forcing it to do today and it has been caught flat footed. As mentioned above, for years Christian publishing houses have churned out apologetic books making the case for Christianity. Rarely were any of those books, or the arguments contained in them challenged in a way that was accessible to the average Christian. The lack of atheist infrastructure (publishing houses, bookstores, radio stations etc.), made it nearly impossible for the atheist counter arguments to get any exposure among the general public, let alone Christians. Therefore, Christian apologetics didn't need to respond because there was pretty much nothing to respond to.

Apologetics was easy.

In a court room after the prosecution presents its case the defense has the opportunity to pick it apart. They meticulously analyze all of the prosecution's arguments looking for alternate explanations, logical fallacies and counter evidence. Good defense attorneys will call expert witnesses to support their case, seeking to either rebut the prosecution's case or undermine it entirely. In the end it is up to the jury to decide who presents the better case. For the better part of the last 40 years Christian apologists have played the role of the prosecutor making the case for why Christianity is guilty of being true. They have presented compelling arguments on behalf of their belief that Christianity is true, and many have found it persuasive enough to convert. The problem is, that in all that time there has not been a defense attorney in the courtroom to challenge the case made by the prosecution.

Times, however, have changed. The Internet has allowed a thousand defense attorneys to bloom! And the problem is, as every good debater knows, whoever speaks last has the advantage in the debate. Such is the case with

online atheist apologetics. Every unanswered atheist objection gives the impression that the atheist challenge has carried the day. Typically, apologetics has largely made a positive case for Christianity. Atheist counter apologetics has now responded to our best arguments online and offered what may seem to some as good counter arguments. Unless they are rebutted it can give the impression that they have defeated the Christian claims.

Third, it needs to be pointed out that much of the atheist apologetic material online is uninformed rhetoric not reasoned argument. The same can be said of much of the Christian apologetic material online as well. There are atheist websites that are informed and good sources of challenging objections to Christianity, but they are almost always measured in their appraisal of the evidence and rarely engage in name-calling and insults. A sure sign of a unbalanced and uninformed webpage is when it contains statements like the following: "There are no good reasons to believe in Christianity", "All arguments for the existence of God have been defeated", "No rational person can look at the evidence and remain a believer." Such statements reveal more about the personality of the

person(s) responsible for the webpage than they do the state of the evidence. The same can be said for Christian websites that give the impression that all atheists are fools. The fact is, the evidence is not conclusive one way or the other. It may be conclusive in the minds of some folks, but that's just a subject evaluation, not an accurate description of an objective state of affairs. Otherwise, there would be nothing to debate, we would all agree.

A final word needs to be said. Despite the best efforts of Christian apologists not everyone will find their arguments persuasive. Some believers will find the arguments and objections raised by online atheists to be better than the Christian responses and lose their faith. Some will not find the objections impressive at all and their faith will remain strong. In the end it is difficult to say why one person finds an argument persuasive and another doesn't. I suspect it has more to do with a host of factors that we are largely unaware of more than it does pure reason or intelligence. In my opinion atheists do raise some difficult objections to the existence of God and also make challenging counter arguments intended to rebut the arguments of Christian apologists. I don't find them ultimately persuasive, but I can see how others

might. Christians have responded and are responding to the wild west of Internet atheist apologetics. Whether they do a good job is always going to be a judgment that is person relative. Not all believers will find those responses are sufficient and as a result will walk away from their faith. In their mind the atheist has made the better case and in the name of intellectual integrity they can no longer believe in something they have come to see as false. To be honest, there isn't much more one can do to challenge a deconvert who has been intellectually persuaded by atheist apologetics other than encourage them to reevaluate their position, love them and pray.

5

HURT SO GOOD?

First rule of leadership, everything is your fault.

A Bug's Life

Emotional Factors

Although intellectual problems with Christianity always play a role in deconversion, many times the driving force behind the loss of faith in God is the loss of faith in the church and Christians. Former believers consistently point to hurts received at the hands of other believers as playing an important role in their loss of faith. Sometimes the hurt came from being letdown by the shortcomings of leadership. Other times it came from Christian leaders outside the church. More often than not it came from rank and file believers. Being wounded caused former believers to reevaluate what they believed. It made them ask questions like, "If these

people are really followers of Jesus, then where is the love, grace and mercy he spoke so much about?" and "If Christianity is true why do I get more acceptance from my non-Christian friends than my Christian ones?"

The assumption at work in the background of the above questions is that, "If Christianity is true, Christians should be like Jesus." That's a fair assumption. Christians should increasingly reflect the image of Jesus. Regrettably, that is not always the case. Christians are broken, fallen people who are just as capable of being jerks as the next guy. When, they do so it can lead to hurts and offenses that negatively impact the faith of their fellow believers. When leaders act in ways that are unChristlike it can have an even greater impact on the faith of believers. The apostle James warns that "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." The greater strictness in judgment is directly related to the impact that church leaders have. Teaching error is a big deal according to James because of the effect it can have in the lives of believers. Causing offenses and hurts in the lives of like believers is serious too, because false teaching, it can be devastating.

Hurts from Church Leadership

Several folks shared with me their experiences of disappointment with church leadership or those who were in positions of leadership in para-church ministries as playing significant roles in their deconversions. Instead of finding support in times of personal crisis, it was noted by multiple former believers that the leadership they looked to for guidance had let them down.

For Derek, a former member of a United Pentecostal church, it was the moral failings of leadership. He maintained that what impacted him was "the stealing, fraud, [and] sexual promiscuity running rampant among UPC pastors that [he] trusted." In his case and the cases of others, the blatant hypocrisy of the spiritual leadership in which he trusted played a role in undermining his faith. For others, it was not so much the moral failings of leadership that negatively impacted their faith, but more the way the leadership in question exercised its authority.

In the case of Charlene, she felt that the heavy-handed approach by the elders of her church actually played a major role in her deconversion. In her situation, the elders refused to endorse her as a cabin leader for a

preteen girls' Bible camp because, at the time, she was dating a non-Christian. Instead, they encouraged her to consider serving in another capacity, one that did not entail being an example to young, impressionable girls:

> While the rest of my Christian friends went off to teach at Bible camp that summer, I was required to stay in town. Looking back, I realize that was a real turning point for me. I'd signed up to be a counselor at the camp and, although I had already proven myself to be a capable teen and a good teacher, Bill [the pastor] was sent to talk to me in my home. He explained that the elders just couldn't let me counsel unless I broke up with David. While the elders of our church possibly protected some preteen girls from possibly hearing that their counselor had a possibly (Who were they to judge?) non-Christian boyfriend, they pushed me down a path from which I never returned. Clearly everyone already assumed I was sinning, so I might just as well begin! I hung out with the church crowd less and less and became more and more involved with David and his friends.

Lauren, another participant, felt that the church leadership not only let her down when she most needed their help, but they rejected her entirely. Lauren worked at a church on the west coast as a youth pastor and worship leader. She eventually had to leave the church to move back east to care for her ailing mother. While there, she began performing as an exotic dancer, something she did prior to her conversion to Christianity. She met a man at her club and had a child with him. They moved to Texas and lived together until he physically abused her so badly that she ended up in the hospital. After separating from him, she returned to her church community seeking support. Shortly after returning, she met and married a man who lied to her about being a Christian in order to marry her.

Devastated, Lauren subsequently began an affair with a younger man, who turned out to be gay. To make matters worse, her husband refused to provide financially for her and her daughter, and they were on the brink of being thrown out of their house. Her affair and other questionable decisions became known to the pastor, resulting in a strained relationship between her and the church leadership. With the approval of her husband, she

returned to exotic dancing in order to pay bills. When the dancing proved to be less lucrative than anticipated, her husband called the pastor to tell him of their dire situation. The church leadership informed her through her husband that she was "nothing but a whore" and that if she came back around the church, they would "have her arrested for child endangerment." Receiving such shocking and harsh treatment from the leadership was the catalyst in her deconversion.

First, it deeply hurt her and changed the way she saw her Christian leaders. They were no longer agents of God's grace but, as she described them, "horrible people." Second, she believed that the church's rejection forced her to make drastic choices in order for her and her daughter not to end up homeless. She said the way she was treated by the leadership "actually pushed me into . . . I actually did porn for two years." In response to this experience, she wrote a column for an adult website entitled, "A Family of Church vs. A Family of Porn: Which Family Really Has the Ties That Bind?" She compared her treatment within the Christian world to that of the porn industry. Looking back on her experiences with the church leadership, she said: I

struggled for a while because I just couldn't believe that these were God's people. You know, I couldn't believe [it]. . . These are not Jesus' works, you know? Jesus walked with the sinners. Jesus said to turn the other cheek. Jesus said, "Go out and make disciples of all nations," not "Stand on a street corner with a freaking sign, telling people they are going to hell"

Suggestion

Being hurt by church leadership ranks pretty high on the list of reasons people cite for why they leave the Faith and no doubt behind many deconversions lay hurts inflicted by church leaders. It's easy and fashionable to pick on the church and point out its flaws and shortcomings. Admittedly, there is lots to pick on. Laying the blame on church leadership for deconversion is one of those easy things to do. In fact, it is too easy. Sometimes good church leaders do bad things, and bad church leaders do bad things and that is on them. They will answer to the Lord for their sin and the lives they negatively impacted.

But in some cases, dare I say many, the fault is not clearly on the shoulders of the leadership. Just as

churches can exhibit close mindedness and rigidity in how they interpret and apply the Bible, there are individuals who can be obstinate and get easily offended by leadership exercising their authority in a healthy manner. So, who is to blame when deconverts point to the church hurting them as the reason for their deconversion? Is it overbearing church leaders who legalistically apply the Bible or individuals who took offense to easily? Who knows? In some cases, it's hard to tell.

Church leaders are responsible to make many decisions, all of which are open to scrutiny and to misunderstanding. Even when decisions are made, and actions taken with the best of intentions, church leaders cannot control how others will perceive their actions and decisions. People can be hurt and offended by leadership not so much because the leadership has done anything wrong but because churches are filled with people and people can get offended over just about anything!

What makes discussing the role of leadership in deconversion so difficult - and Charlene's story illustrates this well - is that church leaders are responsible before God to shepherd their flock according to what they

believe the Bible teaches. Church leadership has to take positions on issues and doctrines that are going to make some people upset no matter how graciously they do so. Clearly, church leaders can't compromise what they believe in order to avoid offending anyone and everyone.

In the case of Charlene, the leadership committed no sinful actions or moral failure in asking Charlene to work at the Bible camp in a support role instead of as a cabin leader because of her relationship with her non-Christian boyfriend. Some readers will agree with the decision of the elders and argue that given what they knew about her relationship with her boyfriend it gave them just cause to not endorse her as a cabin leader. Perhaps others might disagree with the elders and maintain that prohibiting Charlene from being a cabin leader was a bit drastic. Regardless of who you agree with I think most people would agree the great offense she took at their decision and the subsequent choices she made to turn from her faith can't really be laid at the feet of the church leadership. Charlene of course would disagree. To her it was a big deal, a hurt, a wound. I don't want to trivialize Charlene's perspective, for her the church leadership played a contributing factor in her

deconversion. Maybe it was the straw that broke the camel's back. But in my opinion not as big of a role as her perception of the leadership did. So, what's a church leader to do?

If you spend much time reading the literature on deconversion it becomes abundantly clear that certain kinds of churches with a particular perspective on Christianity appear to produce a disproportionate number of deconverts who point to being hurt and wounded by church leaders. They are known as fundamentalist churches.

While fundamentalism is difficult to define, there are certain attitudes and behaviors that typically characterize it. Fundamentalism is often associated with narrow-minded, strict adherence to certain tenets of the Faith, religious exclusivism, and extreme literalism. Other attributes that are identified with fundamentalism, such as legalism, anti-intellectualism, denigrating those outside the Faith, and an overly strict commitment to a particular church, are often indicators of a fundamentalist mentality.

It is not surprising that many deconverts report being reared in environments that they perceived as being strict, legalistic, or fundamentalist. The focus on what not to do and who not to associate with left a bad taste in their mouths and acted as precursors for their deconversions. Few deconverts speak fondly of their religious upbringings.

A hallmark of fundamentalism is an emphasis on taboos: prohibited actions, items, and beliefs. Often, as deconverts break away from the influence of parents and church leaders, they become skeptical toward the taboos they once accepted. Deconverts also speak of being reared in environments that discouraged the asking of questions and critical thinking. Perhaps it was due to the inability of parents and church leaders to answer questions, so they discouraged the asking of them? Maybe it was out of fear that the questions could not be answered and that too much thinking would lead to doubt and unbelief? Regardless, whatever the reasoning behind the suppression of critical inquiry, it became an important factor in the deconversion process.

First, I think it is important to evaluate our beliefs. What teachings do we think are essential aspects of Christianity that cannot be compromised? If that set can't be written on a single page, it may contain too many beliefs. A good guide as to what should be included are those beliefs that have generally been held by the church throughout its history. These can be found in the ecumenical creeds of the early church. Whether men should have long hair has never been one of those beliefs. I'm not saying you can't have a belief about that but the level of importance a belief about hair should have in one's set of beliefs should not equal what one believes about God. Which brings me to suggestion number two.

Second, I think it would be helpful if we categorize our beliefs into different levels, each corresponding to degrees of commitment. For example, "I am convinced Jesus is God", "I am persuaded that there will be a millennial kingdom in the future" and "I am of the opinion that the Lake of Fire is not a literal lake of flames." By doing this it will help us to avoid placing undue emphasis on beliefs that do not deserve it. Not all beliefs should be held with the same degree of dogmatism. Not being able to distinguish the truly

essential from the nonessential is a hallmark of fundamentalism.

Third, I have become convinced that in holding my beliefs I need to do so with great humility. I encounter other believers who hold different views than me all the time. The likelihood that I am always correct, and they are always in error is vanishingly small. This leads me to the conclusion that some of my beliefs are most certainly false. The problem is I don't know which ones they are. If I did, I would change them. Since I hold to the great truths of the Gospel as outlined in the historic church confessions, I have every right to conclude that I am correct on the big things. But what about the not so big things? On those I must assume I have some wrong beliefs. If so, I dare not pass those on to my children, or congregants with the same degree of conviction and importance as I would the essentials. And there's the rub. For fundamentalists every position, belief or conviction is a big one. There is little difference between what is essential and what is optional; what is conviction and what is opinion. There is little doubt that not being able to make that distinction contributes to deconversion.

YOU'RE KILLING ME

What's wrong with you? We're a family!
Walter White, Breaking Bad

Hurts by Fellow Christians

Deconverts report not only being hurt by church leaders but by Christians that sat beside them in the pew. Over and over again, those who have lost their faith tell stories of judgment and condemnation from fellow believers. Harsh words, spoken from self-righteous lips by those who identify as Christians can leave deep wounds. Truly, as Proverbs says, the power of life and death is in the tongue. Christians can sometimes have pretty sharp tongues. When they use them to cut other believers the effects can be tragic. Sam's experience testifies to this fact.

Criticism from other believers that he perceived as unjust or petty caused Sam to question just what Christianity was all about. Because he liked to listen to pop music and watch television, he was told, "You are obviously not a good Christian or obviously a bad one because, if you're a Christian, you wouldn't be doing all those kinds of things." Instead of challenging him to a deeper Christian commitment, it made him say, "Wait a minute! What does pop music have to do with Christianity?" The answer, in his mind, was that it has very little to do with being a Christian.

This hurt was further compounded by comments that he received upon sharing with the church that he had been diagnosed with cancer. Instead of rallying around him, they said, "The reason you have cancer is because you are getting a divorce." Understandably, he was offended by such reasoning and responded by pointing out that, if the accusation is valid, then, "Why doesn't everybody else have cancer because there's a lot bigger problems than divorce?" Moreover, he raised telling indictments of certain members of the church by pointing out, "There's a lot of people's lives around me that, if that is the case, everyone should be walking around with

cancer." Eventually, he perceived that through both his divorce and battle with cancer, "the church abandoned" him.

Rachel also was going through a divorce when she was a Christian. She commented, "When people heard that there was going to be a divorce, all of a sudden I started losing connection with people." Although she recognized that getting a divorce while being a member of the church counsel created an awkward situation between her and other members of the church, the treatment by church members during that period led her to ask herself hard questions about her faith. She wondered, "What am I doing, and what is this group that I'm involved with? Do I still want to be part of it?" She concluded that, because of the negative treatment she experienced at the hands of her fellow believers, she did not "want to be part of [the church]." In the end, she felt like she "was abandoned" by fellow Christians. Subsequently, she left the church and, ultimately, her faith.

When Martin, while serving as a pastor, questioned traditional positions on various social issues, his own congregation attacked him personally and with

hostility. Martin described his church upbringing as a place where, "Questioning was looked upon really negatively . . . and doubt was something you just push aside." Nevertheless, he chose to teach an adult Sunday school class in order to "talk about stigmatized topics," such as, "the death penalty, gay rights, and stuff like that," he said. Consequently, he found himself on the wrong end of some pointed criticism:

> We had this class, and it turned out [that] a lot of people are [sic] in it. I mean, we just got hammered by the churchgoers. . . After that, everything changed. Everybody looked at my wife and myself completely differently. We were Christians, and we happen[ed] to be anti-death penalty and pro-gay rights.

The response from the angry congregants was to "Get personal and attack!" he said. The apparent desire was to get Martin and his wife fired from the church. The church no longer wanted him "to teach their kids" because they thought he "was wrong." He described the hurt and disappointment from his congregants' reactions as "a pretty horrible experience." Shortly thereafter, he left the

church. It was not long after that he left the Faith altogether.

Suggestion

I am always amazed when I hear stories about how insensitive we Christians can be. Then I remember some of my "finer moments" and I am not so amazed. While I may not have said some of the hurtful things the people above did, I have said my share of foolish things. I wonder if they contributed to anyone leaving the Faith. I'll probably never know.

How then can causing offense to other believers be minimized? The four suggestions I offer to you who are reading this book are the same advice I give myself:

1. Romans 15:7 reminds us to "accept one another then just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God." Jesus accepted us as we were, warts and all. He came not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17). It's not that Jesus wasn't aware of our sins, shortcomings and failures, but in his first coming he came to redeem us not judge us. Likewise, as ambassadors for Christ we should

accept other believers, just as he did. Our job is not to judge them. Having said that it doesn't mean we never speak into the lives of fellow believers. But in my opinion before we do, the following conditions need to be met:

    a. We have the authority to address the issue. Some issues are the responsibility of church leadership, not ours.

    b. We have the kind of relationship that gives us to the right to speak into another person's life.

    c. We have the right motive. Not merely to point out error, but to assist a fellow believer in their walk with Christ.

    d. We have dealt with our own sins by taking the log out of our own eye before helping others take the speck out of another's.

2. Ask yourself if the issue you are going to raise is worth the interpersonal problems it may create. If it probably isn't, then don't raise it.

God values love and unity among believers above nearly all else (John 13 & 17). If raising the issue is going to cause problems, make sure it is an issue that is important.

3. Ask yourself if the need to raise an issue with a fellow believer has more to do with your own bitterness and the need to point out wrongs than a genuine concern for the other believer. If it is just for the sake of pointing out their failures, or self-righteously passing judgment don't do it.

4. Remember that loving someone doesn't mean condoning their actions. In the case of Rachel, she felt shunned because she was going through a divorce and believers from her church abandoned her. I think it's safe to assume that they did so because they thought she was sinning and being friendly to her would imply they condoned her choice to get divorced. But it's okay to love people who you might think are sinning, it doesn't mean you condone their behavior. I realize there are

times when love must be tough, Paul was pretty clear about that. Some sins require meaningful church discipline, but that's a leadership issue not an individual one.

THE END OF ALL THINGS

A conclusion is a place where you get tired of thinking.

Arthur Bloch

In Conclusion

It is sad and troubling for Christians to hear that someone has lost their faith and no longer identifies as a believer in Jesus. We often ask how such a thing could happen. In the previous chapters I identified five popular reasons, which deconverts give for their deconversion. I also offered a number of suggestions that I think may be helpful in heading deconversion off at the pass.

There are no easy answers to explain why someone comes to faith in Christ or why he or she loses that faith. Individuals are complex, social, psychological,

spiritual beings who are shaped by their environment and born with a personality that is uniquely theirs. Some experience emotional hurts at the hands of church leadership and other believers and it causes them to turn to God. Others respond by turning away. Some encounter intellectual objections to their faith and find them persuasive. They begin to doubt and eventually no longer believe and can no longer identify as Christians. Others hear the same arguments and are not impressed at all. A third group may experience doubt but be able to live with the tension, managing to retain their faith in spite of the counterarguments. What determines the group an individual will fall into is impossible to predict. I hope however, that the suggestions I have offered in this short and inadequate treatment on deconversion help equip those who read it to understand deconversion better and provide them with tools to avoid some of the biggest factors, which lead to it.

There is Hope

The pages of the New Testament are filled with warnings to not turn away from the faith. Jesus, Paul, John, Peter and the author of the letter to the Hebrews

repeatedly encourage those who have started to follow Jesus to endure and remain faithful throughout their lives. Despite that, there are some notable examples of apostates in the New Testament. Obviously, the most well-known is Judas. His betrayal and deconversion was without repentance. He walked away from Christ never to return. But there is another of Jesus' disciples who walked away from Christ and did return. Not only did he return, he went on to become the leader the church. Peter denied Jesus three times on the very night Jesus needed him most. When asked if he was a disciple of Jesus, he denied he was and even claimed he did not know him. Earlier in the evening Peter had confidently asserted that even if all the other disciples fell away, he would never leave Jesus. He went so far as to say that given the choice he would die for Jesus before he would deny him. And yet, when the moment of truth came, he fell away. Like Judas, Peter betrayed the Lord. But, and this is important to note, Peter's betrayal was not final. Unlike Judas who felt guilty for what he did, but did not repent of it, Peter did. His repentance eventually led to his restoration and being used by the Lord to shepherd the flock of the early church. Here is the point; when those we love wander

from the faith, or outright deny it, we never know if they are a Judas or a Peter. But the story of Peter should give us hope. Just because an individual who once identified as a follower of Jesus falls away, does not mean that they will never return. We have a biblical example that it is not only possible for an individual to return to the faith, but that they can be restored to a meaningful place of service by the Lord. We never know the end of a person's story until the last chapter is written. In the meantime, we can take comfort from Peter's story. Sometimes leavers return.

Online deconversion stories are abundant. People like to share about how they have been "set free" from what they perceived as a false and dangerous religion. And yet, there is a lesser but growing body of narratives online that could be called "reconversion" stories. A reconversion story is one that recounts how an individual converted to Christianity, then deconverted from Christianity, only to reconvert back to Christianity again. Reading these stories can be encouraging for those who have a loved one who has deconverted. They remind us that God is still at work in the lives of those who have

turned from him, and that like Peter, some will return. Darrin is one who did.

Darrin was raised in Texas and grew up in a Christian environment. He prayed to received Christ and was baptized at the age of seven. He read the Bible, evangelized others and according to him he tried as hard as he could to live as a Christian. But over time he came to the conclusion that he was being fed lies. The reason? He was convinced the Bible taught that God chose some people to go to Heaven and condemned others to Hell even before they were born. God looked to him as a grand puppet master creating humans for his own glory even if it meant their eternal suffering. Wanting no part of such an unfair and capricious God he left the faith.

In spite of the fact that he no longer was a Christian, Darrin had a deep interest in the philosophy of religion and theology. However, now he was looking at those subjects from the outsider as an atheist leaning agnostic. On the Internet he found other individuals who, like him, enjoyed talking and writing about the shortcomings and falsehood of religion, particularly Christianity. Eventually, he found himself connected with

a well-known website for former Christians and one
which sought to debunk Christianity. Darrin became a
regular contributor to the website and dedicated himself
to demonstrating that Christianity was irrational and false.
He did so for years. But then something happened.
Darrin changed his mind. He posted the following
message on his website:

> Sometime last week, I realized that I could no
> longer call myself a skeptic. After fifteen years
> away from Christianity, most of which was spent
> as an atheist with an active, busy intent on
> destroying the faith, I returned to a church (with a
> real intention of going for worship) last Sunday.
> Although I know I may struggle with doubt for
> the rest of my life, my life as an atheist is over.

He added:

> Briefly, I grew tired of the lack of explanation for:
> the existence of the universe, moral values and
> duties, objective human worth, consciousness and
> will, and many other topics. . . I realized that I
> could not answer them no matter how many long
> nights I spent hitting the books.

The Christianity that Darrin has returned to is not the Christianity that he left. It is not the conservative, evangelical denomination he once attended, but it is one that is theologically orthodox. And that's okay. Because even though he might not be a Christian in the way that some would like him to be, he is now serving the Lord and allowing God to continue to mold him into the image of his son.

Benjamin, like Darrin became a Christian early in life. But the immorality that he experienced at the highest levels of his church was so damaging it shook his faith to its core. It came to light that his pastor had committed multiple acts of adultery, embezzled money, purchased lavish homes and vehicles for himself with the money and used illegal drugs. It would be nearly a decade before he stepped back into church again of his own free will. He noted:

> For me, (and probably most of us) there was a giant disconnect between the character of Jesus and the way his followers demanded you live. *I liked Jesus.* He seemed kind and compassionate and enjoyed associating with the people I associated

with (the party crowd). However, I wasn't
interested in being a "Christian" if it meant
looking like the status quo. His people were moral
Nazis, and they had really strange rules.

What was it that brought Benjamin back to his faith? In a
word, it was love. At 27, he met two men who changed his
view of what it meant to be a Christian. They were
tattooed, loved beer and didn't fit the mold of what a
Christian was supposed to look like according to his
former church. In fact, they looked exactly the opposite.
But it was how they lived that impacted Benjamin:

What won me over was the way they loved me
and loved people who were hurting and messy. It
was the way they shared openly about their hurts
and repeated failures. It was the way they loved
their wives and spoke so highly about them. It was
the joy they had even in the midst of tears and
deep suffering. It was the fact they didn't pretend
to have it all together or all the answers.
Sometimes they would just say "*I don't know.*"

Their honesty, love and commitment to living out the
message of Jesus was infectious. Benjamin saw in them

something he wanted for himself. Rather than asking him to pray the sinner's prayer however, they told him that following Jesus had a high cost. Jesus wasn't interested in coming into his heart. He wanted his life. And that is just what Benjamin gave him:

> What's funny is when I became a Christian, I never asked Jesus into my heart. I never went to the front to of the church to let everyone know I was down with this whole confusing Jesus dies on a cross, resurrects, and is God, but God can't die because he's eternal. . . Instead one day I had this epiphany that "*I'm all in and I guess I'm one of them.*"

And, all in he is. Today, Benjamin, the young man who once left Christianity with no desire to return is a pastor. He is actively loving people into the kingdom by letting them know that no one is beyond God's grace. And, as one who previously renounced his faith, he knows that better than anyone.

APPENDIX A

An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

Avoidance Issues

In 2012 my boss approached me concerned that I had missed a staff meeting. I explained that the reason I missed the meeting was that my car overheated on the freeway and I had to pull over and wait for it to cool down. At the time I was driving a 15-year-old used Saturn that I had purchased from my landlord for $500. When my boss asked why I was driving such an unreliable car, I told him it was because that's all we could afford. Later that day he called me into his office and told me that he wanted me to go out and find a new car that would meet the needs of my family and he would raise my salary to cover the cost. I was stunned. I had never owned a new car and at my salary there was no way we could ever afford one. What a great blessing it was for my

wife and I to visit car dealerships around southern California shopping for a brand-new car! We eventually settled on a model that we liked, and true to his word, my boss gave me a raise to cover the price of the vehicle. I still remember the day I drove it off the lot and brought it home. We loved that car and it served us well for two years. Then one day I noticed that it started to make a rattling noise. I'm no mechanic but from what I could tell the noise wasn't serious. It sounded like something was loose and needed to be tightened. I thought about taking it to a mechanic to be looked at but figured there was no rush. Boy was I wrong. One day in August my wife drove me to the airport to catch a plane to Canada for a speaking engagement. On the way to the airport we both noted the noise and commented that I should think about getting it checked out. Nancy dropped me off at the airport and I flew to Canada. Upon landing in Toronto, I turned my phone back on to check my messages. Nancy had called and the message she left wasn't good. After she dropped me off, she drove back to work, parked the car in the parking lot and went about her business. At 5:00pm she left work, got in the car and drove out of the parking lot. And that's when it happened. The engine

smoked, made a loud bang and seized up. All of the dashboard warning lights came on, the car lost power and she couldn't steer it. Unsure of what to do and unable to reach me she had it towed to a local mechanic who was recommended by a friend. The mechanic looked at it and told her that the engine was a complete wright-off. The problem was that there was no oil in the engine and due to the lack of lubrication it overheated to the point where it eventually destroyed itself. This wasn't going to be a simple fix. We needed a new engine and new engines aren't cheap. Feeling like we had no choice we responded to the problem by giving the mechanic the go ahead to install a new engine in the car. It was costly, time consuming and very inconvenient. And it all could have been avoided if I had just taken the car into the mechanic sooner.

When it can be done, avoiding major problems with a vehicle is much easier and cheaper than responding to them. The mechanic discovered that the problem with my car was a simple defective gasket. Even though I just had the oil changed two months prior, a loose gasket was allowing the oil to escape and burn off leaving no signs that the car was running low on oil. When it finally seized

up and melted in on itself there was no oil left in the engine at all. The new engine, the money and the inconvenience all could have been avoided if I just took it in earlier. Because I didn't, I was forced to respond to the problem which turned out to be a lot more work and hassle than had I avoided it in the first place. The same is true with respect to the obstacles that many deconverts trace their loss of faith to. Unfortunately, many of the problems deconverts encountered could have been avoided. However, once they have taken root they need to be addressed. And just as with vehicle maintenance, avoiding problems that erode faith is much easier than trying to respond to them.

I wrote this book with two goals in mind. The first is to offer parents and those in ministry helpful advice on how to avoid unintentionally contributing to faith exit. Well-meaning Christian parents and those in ministry can, and do, set believers up for crises of faith that sometimes end with the loss of faith. When former believers share what it was that led to their loss of faith some of the most prominent reasons are directly related to what they were taught it meant to be a *"real"* Christian. Former believers reveal that what they were taught it

meant to be a real Christian consisted of not only a few essential doctrines they needed to affirm, but also a long list of other beliefs that they understood to be nonnegotiable as well. These included beliefs such as the inerrancy of the Bible, young earth creationism, a literal Hell, a particular view of the inspiration of the Bible, the rapture, head coverings, and a specific form of church governance just to name a few. Furthermore, being a real Christian meant having specific beliefs about drinking alcohol, smoking, dancing, dating, working on Sunday, birth control, clothing styles, the wearing of makeup and many more. In short, in their mind to be a real Christian they had to submit to a very specific and narrow set of beliefs. What they did not realize is that what they were taught it means to be a real Christian was in large part their church's particular take on Christianity rather than mere Christianity itself.[1] Consequently they identified

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[1] Of course not every deconvert falls into this category. Some like Ken Daniels, a former Wycliffe missionary and now agnostic atheist, and Dan Barker a former fulltime itinerant Christian musician and evangelist turned atheist did question what it meant to be a Christian. They did analyze their beliefs and realized that many of the beliefs they were told were essential were in fact particular to their church community. In their case it was not a bloated set of beliefs masquerading as real Christianity they rejected. It was the essential, core claims of the faith they found unbelievable. Daniels explicitly

Christianity simpliciter with a bloated collection of nonnegotiable beliefs and practices that was a great burden to live in accordance with. Naturally then, if they believed that being a real Christian required that they affirm and adopt all of what they were told authentic Christianity is, they concluded that if they denied one tenet they were denying the entire faith. Deconversion narratives are littered with statements such as "If real Christians don't get tattoos, then I don't want to be a Christian." "If real Christians don't drink alcohol or wear makeup then I guess I'm not a real Christian because I want to do both." "I can't be a real Christian and believe in evolution, but I do believe in evolution, so I guess I am no longer a real Christian."

A fundamental assumption of former believers revealed by the above quotes is they unquestionably believed that in order to be a Christian they had to believe and / or practice a long list of requirements. They appear to believe that being a Christian is primarily, if not entirely

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rejects the suggestion that if he had only believed the "right" kind of Christianity that to day he would still be a Christian. Since this is not an apologetics book, but what I have called a therapeutic approach to dealing with doubt, I will not be dealing with objections that Daniels and Barker raise.

identified with affirming certain beliefs and living according certain rules. Christianity was for them a package deal. In their mind if they rejected one belief or practice the others would fall like dominos. Each had a set of beliefs and practices in mind that was unique to their upbringing. They all knew what it meant to be a real Christian according to their church or family's version of Christianity. I recently came across an example of this kind of thinking at a website entitled "Ten Things Real Christian Women Shouldn't Do." The title of the article reveals that in the mind of the author there are two types of Christian women: fake Christian women and real Christian women. The real Christian women are those who live according to the rules outlined in the article. Those who do not live in accordance with the views of the author are at best, uncommitted, lukewarm disciples, and at worst posers who are not Christians at all. Ironically, according to the article one of the things real Christian women shouldn't do is to "expect other Christians to live by your convictions." And yet that is just what the author has done in writing the article. She expressed ten of her convictions and forced them on

other women by saying that in order to be a real Christian woman they need to adopt her convictions!

"Christian" or Disciple of Jesus?

I'm sure that if you asked the parents and church leaders of former believers, they would agree that many of the beliefs mentioned above are not necessary to be a Christian, but they probably would feel that some version of them is important to being the right kind of Christian. Whether they acknowledge it or not, all churches have a view of what a follower of Jesus looks like. Some place a great emphasis on abstaining from "worldly activities", others on living frugally, the use of spiritual gifts, the proper way to meet as a church, frequency of devotions and prayer, or holding to pet doctrines. Often those doctrines are uniquely important to the church and will be emphasized and taught in a way that can make them seem almost essential to affirm, at least if one wants to be a real Christian. For example, a church I know of takes great pride in that they "gather unto the Lord according to how the Bible teaches it should be done, not according to what is currently trendy or successful." The implication is clear, they are authentic Christians because they do it right

and others, while Christians are not serious Christians because they don't.

Charitably speaking, I think what drives churches and families to form their views of what a Christian should look like is a desire to be faithful to the Bible as they understand it. That desire is commendable, but there is a danger that exists when we forget that being a real Christian is not what we should be focusing on as we train up others in the faith. Instead we should be seeking to make disciples of Jesus. What do I mean by that? Simply this, Christianity is the name of a religion and religions are, among other things, systems of belief. A Christian then by definition is a person who affirms the beliefs of Christianity. But what are the beliefs of Christianity?

Christianity has three main branches, Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and all of the various denominational subgroups that each divide into. There are numerous sets of beliefs and practices that are unique to each Christian community. When a church or family identifies real Christianity with a specific set of beliefs and practices beyond the essentials and then claims that to be

a genuine Christian an individual has to affirm all of them, they are guilty of seeking allegiance to a theological / doctrinal system rather than to the person of Christ. But Jesus isn't looking for people to become "Christians" in that sense, someone who affirms the set of truths that demark a version of the religion that is named after him. He is looking for disciples. Those who will pledge their allegiance to him in an act of personal trust and seek to follow him. When we seek to make real Christians instead of disciples, we are in danger of starting believers down the road to deconversion. Why do I say that?

In Essentials Unity

Without question, in order to be in a right relationship with God, individuals need to intellectually affirm certain truth claims. At the same time, I am convinced that a good number of the beliefs and practices in each system, while necessary to be a particular kind of real Christian are unnecessary to be a disciple of Jesus. If we are not careful that kind of "Christianity" can feel like a strait jacket, or burden that cannot be borne. Which is why many former believers testify that leaving their faith set them free. They experienced a version of

"Christianity" which they mistook for what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus, as a weight and burden.

I know that many of us have strong beliefs on secondary and tertiary doctrines, but we need to be careful that we do not explicitly or implicitly give the impression to those we socialize into the faith that they are essential to be a disciple of Jesus. Believing them may be essential to be a certain kind of Christian according to a certain version of Christianity, (Baptist, Lutheran, Wesleyan, etc.) but not to be a passionately committed disciple of Jesus. So, the question is, what is it that we want for our children and those to whom we minister? Is it that they affirm a system of propositional claims that comprise a version of Christianity or that they are disciples of Jesus? But you might be thinking, "Surely there are things that individuals do have to affirm to be a disciple of Jesus! Are you saying what a person believes is unimportant?" Yes, there are. And no, I'm not. To be a disciple of Jesus there are beliefs that one does, most definitely have to affirm. If an individual does not affirm them then they aren't a disciple of Jesus at all. But those belies are relatively few in number. The first step in becoming a disciple of Jesus (or a Christian in the most

basic sense) is to have one's sins forgiven. For that to occur a person needs to believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and entrust themselves to him. The mental act of acknowledging Jesus and his work, in conjunction with personal trust in him as one's substitute makes one a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, to become a disciple of Jesus, one need only believe a small number of claims about Jesus, and what he has done for us on the cross. "All well and good" you might be saying, "But disciples of Jesus have a responsibility to submit themselves to what the Bible teaches. They are to grow in their knowledge of God and that comes from the Bible. Therefore, aren't there beliefs that a disciple of Jesus ought to affirm above and beyond those which are necessary for salvation?" Yes, there are beliefs that all Christians should affirm beyond those that are necessary for salvation. Those beliefs are what we call the essentials for Christian orthodoxy. Orthodoxy means, "right belief" and there is a collection of beliefs that have been held by virtually all Christians throughout history. They are the doctrines that the church has determined to be the boundary markers for correct theological thinking This collection of beliefs can be found in the early creeds of

the church specifically, the Apostles' Creed 200 CE, the Nicene Creed 325 CE, and the Chalcedonian Creed 451 CE. These three creeds identify the minimal set of beliefs that a person ought to affirm in order to be orthodox in belief. Yet even that is probably too strong of a statement. A person does not have to affirm all of the beliefs in the ecumenical creeds to be considered theologically orthodox. Like the thief on the cross, one can be ignorant of what the creeds teach. However, one cannot be considered orthodox in terms of what Christians believe and deny the major tenets of the creeds. Ultimately the Bible, not the creeds, is the standard for orthodox belief. But the creeds do a good job of distilling the really important teachings of the Bible that nearly all Christians at all times have affirmed.[2] Theologian Michael Bird says, "In sum, the purpose of the creeds was to mark out the boundaries of the faith. The creeds were warnings to the effect that 'all who

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[2] Of the three major creeds, the Eastern Orthodox Church affirms the original wording of the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian creed. It does not reject the Apostles' Creed in content but, because it was not the product of an official church council, it does not recognize it as binding. The western Churches — Roman Catholic and Protestant — affirm all three creeds.

proceed beyond this point do so at the peril of their own souls."'[3]

Conclusion

I am spending considerable time addressing the issue of avoiding problems because I am convinced that many of the problems that former believers credit their loss of faith to could have been avoided. One of the most prevalent factors in deconversion narratives is that former believers felt that they needed to affirm an inflexible system of system of doctrine and practice that elevated numerous secondary, tertiary and idiosyncratic matters of conscience to the level of the essentials. Christianity was an all or nothing, take it or leave it package deal in their minds. Instead of seeing the way of Jesus as joyous, restful and liberating they saw it as stifling, wearisome and a burden to bear.

Christianity for them was a strait jacket confining them or an anchor weighing them down. Repeatedly the term deconverts use to speak of the impact of losing their faith is freedom. Although this might be surprising to you

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[3] Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe,* 24.

it wouldn't be if you took time to read enough deconversion stories. Those stories reveal that time and time again former Christians were set up to fail by well-meaning parents and church leaders. Former believers were taught the only way to be a Christian is to be a real Christian and a real Christian was someone who believed and practiced X, where X was a bloated system of beliefs and practices that could not be compromised. When deconverts for various reasons found themselves unable to affirm all that constituted X they concluded that they could no longer be Christians. The inflexibility of the system they inherited made rejecting one belief tantamount to rejecting the entire system. In their minds to be a real Christian they needed to buy into everything they were taught, lock, stock and barrel because that just *was* Christianity.

By failing to understand the difference between the essentials that constitute the heart of Christianity which must be affirmed and the nonessentials that do not, well-meaning Christians have unwittingly placed a serious obstacle to keeping the faith before believers. Ironically that obstacle is some form of real Christianity. My suggestion for how we can avoid doing that is a bit of

a cliché. We need to major on the majors and on the nonessentials recognize that our positions on secondary beliefs are just that, secondary. They do not constitute "real" Christianity but only our best approximation of it. That being so we need to hold those beliefs with varying degrees of conviction and always with the humility that we could be wrong.

APPENDIX B

There must be fifty ways to leave your lover.
Fifty ways to leave your lover.
Paul Simon

One of a Kind?

Individuals come to faith in all kinds of ways. Some find the Lord in the midst of a crisis; others through the example of a friend. Some have dramatic testimonies of how Jesus radically changed their life; others adopted the faith of their family. Nobody has the same conversion story. Likewise, individuals leave the faith in all kinds of ways. As we have seen, sometimes it's an emotional issue that makes the first domino fall and sometimes it's an intellectual one. In this appendix we will look at two categories that the majority of deconversions seem to fall under.

Losers: (Un)able to Believe

There are any number of ways to classify faith loss. Some believers go from committed Christian to apathetic agnostic. Others go from apathetic Christian to committed atheist. Still others land somewhere else on the unbelief spectrum. The ways that individuals lose their faith is as unique as each individual. Having said that though, there is at least one important distinction in how individuals deconvert that shows up in deconversion narratives. That distinction is between those who lose their faith and those who reject their faith. The difference between the two makes all the difference in the world. The first group by their own admission wanted to remain Christians but couldn't because they no longer were persuaded by the evidence. For some the evidence no longer supported a belief in God, for others the evidence pointed away from God. Losing their faith was a cause for grief not anger. They wanted to believe and looked for ways to do so but found that given the persuasiveness of the objections they were unable to do so. In their case faith receded or evaporated it was not rejected. This usually happened over a period of time and involved a

process akin to, "one step forward two steps back" until faith was gone.

This kind of faith loss highlights the involuntary nature of belief. Whether we like to admit it or not, what we believe is not always, or even often, under our control. To believe a claim is to have a positive attitude toward it. That attitude is characterized by the sentiment that the claim is true. If I say, "I believe that my wife is attractive." I am saying that I am of the opinion that the claim "My wife is attractive." is true. When it comes to beliefs such as "My wife is attractive." or "It's hot out today.", or "The zebra has stripes." typically we find ourselves having such beliefs, not choosing them. They spontaneously form in us due to numerous factors. Some of those factors we are aware of and others we are not. In the case of thinking that my wife is attractive, I did not choose to believe that, I just found myself believing it when I was in her presence. Admittedly, my belief about my wife is subjective in nature. It is a matter of preference or taste. There is not an objective fact about her attractiveness that exists apart from how I feel about it. But finding ourselves in possession of a belief rather than choosing to

believe a claim is also the case for beliefs that are objective in nature.

The truth-value of objective claims does not depend on how a person feels. Claims that are objective in nature are either true or false depending on whether or not they correspond with a fact of reality. How an individual feels about an objective claim has no bearing on whether it is true. Consider the claim "Santa Claus exists." That claim is either true or false and what I believe about it has no bearing on its truth-value. The question is, do I have a choice in believing that Santa Claus exists? The answer is no. We simply cannot believe a claim we are convinced is false. How then do we determine if a claim is true or false? In most cases it is based on the evidence. If the evidence for a claim is overwhelming, we don't choose to believe it, we simply find ourselves believing it as a result of the evidence. Conversely if the evidence counts decisively against a claim, we cannot choose to believe it no matter how much we may want to. I'm quite certain that no matter how much I may want to believe in Santa, I simply cannot do it because the claim "Santa Claus exists." is at odds with the evidence. There are no good reasons for a

grown, informed adult to believe in the existence of Santa and many, many reasons to deny his existence. I cannot make myself believe a claim I think is false no matter how much I may want to do so. The only way I could is to reject all of the other beliefs that I have – and which I am quite certain about – that preclude Santa's existence. But doing so is impossible and without question irrational.

For one group of former believers their loss of belief in the existence of God was similar to my loss of belief in the existence of Santa Claus. It was an involuntary response to what they perceived as good evidence to the contrary. In these kinds of deconversions it is accurate to say that former believers lost their faith, they did not reject it. Over time they came to find that the belief "God exists." was no longer one they were able to affirm. Most say the loss of faith wasn't the result of a decisive moment or crisis, but the end of a gradual process of erosion. Since they no longer thought the evidence supported belief in God, even if they wanted to continue believing it wasn't within their power to do so.

Rejects: Unwilling to Believe

The second category of deconvert that appears in the literature is representative of those who actively rejected their faith without much fight at all. Individuals who fall into this group were quick to accept the objections they encountered and renounced their faith relatively quickly. In such cases the emotion was less that of sadness and more that of anger. The feeling of anger usually stemmed from a sense of betrayal they felt over what they perceived of as being misled or deceived about Christianity. The rejection of the Faith in this case is both intellectual and emotional, with the emotional playing a more significant role than in the first category of deconversion. In the first category there was a willingness to give the Bible and Christianity the benefit of the doubt and seek resolutions to doubts. In the second category there is less willingness to do so. It is unclear exactly what accounts for the difference in the way individuals respond to objections and counter arguments to Christianity. I am inclined to think that deconverts who quickly capitulated to objections, confidently maintain that Christianity is false, and harbor feelings of resentment and anger

rejected their faith for less than purely rational reasons. In saying that I am not claiming that anyone ever leaves the faith for purely rational reasons. I am only pointing out that offering responses to those in the second category is more challenging than those in the first. Why do I say that? I say that because those in the first category may want to believe but feel they can't because there is an intellectual issue that makes believing impossible. For example, if a believer thinks that believing in God and evolution is incompatible and they are convinced that evolution is established beyond a reasonable doubt, for them the belief in the existence of God will be lost. They may want to continue believing in God, but they are incapable of doing so given two things, their assumption about God and evolution being incompatible and their positive estimation of the evidence in favor of evolution. The situation is different however for a believer who harbors resentment toward God for what they perceive as restrictive or intolerant moral commands in the Bible. Or, when the Bible portrays God in ways that are at odds with their modern moral sensibilities. In these cases, I have little doubt that a good number of deconverts who have rejected rather than lost their faith were looking for

a reason to justify their unbelief. I fully confess that this is only my opinion. But empirical evidence does exist to support it. Dr. Harry Hui and his colleagues at the University of Hong Kong have demonstrated that scoring high in certain personal values makes one more likely to reject the faith than those who do not score high in relation to the same values. And interestingly it is values, not intellectual beliefs that are predictors of deconversion. What are those values you ask: self-determination (autonomy), stimulation (excitement and challenge) and power (being in need of control). In layman's terms these translate to "I determine what is good.", "I thrive off of confrontation." and "I want things my way." Is there any doubt that scoring high in possession of such traits is a predictor of rejecting one's faith?

How quickly and uncritically former believers are to accept objections and the manner in which they view their former faith may give an indication if they were unable or unwilling to believe. The quicker the deconversion and more the resentful the reaction the more likely the issue is being unwilling. This is often seen in deconversion narratives that point to problems with

the Bible as the catalyst for their loss of faith. It is not uncommon to read narratives where a former believer is quite put out by all of the apparent contradictions they have discovered in the Bible. To them such problems are a clear indication that the Bible is a sham. Typically, the contradictions they list are not contradictions at all and show not that the Bible has errors but their own ignorance. I can't tell you how many self-assured former believers I have read who think the Bible is disproven because Paul teaches salvation is by faith apart from works and James teaches faith without works is dead. Or that Proverbs teaches that we should not answer a fool according to his folly or we will become like him, and then in the next verse it teaches us to answer a fool according to his folly or he will become wise in his own eyes. "Which is it?" they ask, "You can't have it both ways." That anyone would think the above examples of supposed contradictions actually rise to the level of real contradictions, and then think they have disproven the Bible, reveal more about the heart of the individual than it does about the truth of the Bible. It's easy to find problems with the Bible if you want to. It's also not hard to find good responses to those problems if you want to

as well. It is clear that in the case of some former believers they simply wanted to find the problems and had no interest in the responses. Which of course reveals that their loss of faith was not a loss of something they valued but a rejection of something they didn't.

In all honesty, the two categories are not hermetically sealed. One is not necessarily in either the first or second category of unbelief. I can imagine former believers who deeply wanted to maintain their faith but who could not, being angry with the church and parents for presenting something to them that became deeply meaningful and losing it made them angry. But if they accept the objections without much pushback or investigation into whether or not Christians have responded to them then there is a good chance the issue is not an intellectual one but a matter of the heart.

APPENDIX C

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

The Apostle Paul

Three Beliefs and You're In!

The word *believe* is an important one for Christians. Jesus says that believing in him is what separates those who have eternal life from those who do not. The Gospel of John places special emphasis on the importance of believing. Just consider the following passage, John 3:16-19:

> For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not

believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

Likewise, Paul, Peter, James, Jude and the book of Hebrews place a premium on belief in Jesus. In reference to those to whom the righteousness of Christ will be given, Paul says that it will be "those who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." (Romans 4:24). Peter reminded the Jerusalem Council that God had saved the gentiles because they believed in Christ and not because they kept the Law (Acts 15:7-11). Likewise, James appealed to the Old Testament to make the case for the importance of believing in God to be justified (James 2:23). Jude takes a different approach. Instead of telling his readers that believing in God is necessary to be saved, he points out that while the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, he "later destroyed those who did not believe." (Jude vs. 5). Finally, the author of the book of Hebrews also speaks of the importance of belief when he instructs his readers that only those who believe will enter into the Lord's rest (Hebrews 4:3). Without question, believing in Jesus is a necessary condition for a relationship with God.

But that raises the question of just what the biblical writers had in mind when they used the word believe. There are three aspects that constitute the biblical concept of belief. The first has to do with the mental aspect. In our everyday language to believe a claim is simply to be disposed to think it's true. For example, if I say that Los Angeles is in Southern California and you, for various reasons are inclined to agree, then we would say that you believe my statement. This aspect of belief is an important element in what the biblical writers had in mind when they used the words believe or belief in reference to Jesus and God. Another way of saying this would be that a necessary component of biblical belief is that gives mental assent that a claim about Jesus is true. However, mental assent is not the only thing they had in mind. In other words, while affirming that the claims about Jesus are true is a necessary element of biblical belief, it's not sufficient. The authors of the Bible have more in mind than merely mental affirmation when they use the words believe or belief. Although in contemporary usage the word believe is almost entirely concerned with affirming that a particular statement or claim is true, the biblical meaning is much more robust.

The difference between our contemporary usage of the term believe and that of the Bible can lead to an unfortunate misunderstanding. Which is that the biblical writers primarily call us to merely an intellectual assent that the claims of Jesus are true. The invitation to "believe in Jesus for salvation" is heard as "acknowledge these claims about Jesus are true and God will save you." That, however, is decidedly not what Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude or the author of Hebrews had in mind when they called on individuals to "believe in Jesus." Rather, there is another aspect of the biblical usage of the word believe that is not contained in our contemporary usage of the word. The second aspect is personal trust.

When Jesus called people to believe in him, he was calling them not only to acknowledge the truth of his claims, but also to place their trust in him. When the Bible commands individuals to believe it's calling them not simply to affirm that the statement "God exists" or "Jesus saves" is true, but to pledge to him their fidelity. "Belief" in biblical terms has both an intellectual and a volitional element. Which is why it's very possible to believe in Jesus and in the existence of God according to the contemporary usage of the word believe, but not in

the biblical sense. One can quite easily affirm that something is true without placing one's trust in it. In one sense – the contemporary sense – I believe that if I were to sit on the sofa it will hold me up. But I only believe in the biblical sense when I combine my intellectual affirmation of its ability to bear my weight with actively trusting it to do so by actually sitting in it.

Logically speaking one must intellectually believe the sofa will hold them up before they can trust it to do so. No one would say, "I don't intellectually believe that the sofa will hold me up, but I will trust it to do so." That would be irrational. Consequently, to believe in the truly biblical sense one must first be inclined to think the claims "God exists" and "Jesus saves" are true. In short, when the Bible speaks of belief it assumes an amalgam of two necessary elements, an intellectual assent to its claims combined with a volitional commitment of trust directed towards the subject of those claims, the person of Christ. Finally, the third aspect that comprises the biblical notion of belief is that biblical belief is concessive.

Biblical belief or faith is not a process of non-thinking. Rather it is the result of evaluating the support

for the Bible's claims. Biblical belief rests on reasons and evidence. And yet, it also goes beyond those reasons. Although there are good reasons to give our mental assent to what the Bible claims, those reasons are not conclusive. In other words, the evidence supporting the truthfulness of the Bible is not so overwhelming that it compels a person to affirm its truthfulness. In spite of the fact that the Bible's claims are not known with certainty, biblical belief commits itself to those claims in the absence of conclusive proof. Biblical belief concedes that its commitment extends beyond the available evidence.

Belief in the biblical sense is affirming the Bible's claims are true, having an attitude of trust, reliance or allegiance to the subject of those claims. At the same time, even though the Bible's claims are supported by reasons, those reasons do not compel belief.

Belief vs. Faith

At this point I think it is important to point out that the Bible translates essentially the same Greek word *pistis,* as both *believe* and *faith.* Why this is important is because even though in Greek they mean the same thing, in English they do not. The word believe in English

connotes the idea of intellectual assent only. But as I have argued above, that is only one aspect of what the Bible means when it uses the word believe. The word faith in contemporary usage connotes the idea of trust, reliance or dependence. As previously mentioned, trust of that sort is also an essential element in biblical belief. Today unfortunately, for many, faith is understood as being the opposite of reason, or the neglecting of one's duties when it comes to responsible belief. Faith in this sense is blind acceptance of a claim that far exceeds the reasons one has to hold it. It is not uncommon for those who are critical of religious commitment to argue that religious belief is based on faith, whereas agnosticism or atheism is based on reason. Such an understanding of faith is decidedly not what the Bible means when it uses the word. Faith or belief in biblical terms is having enough reasons for a hope worth acting on. It is clear from the testimonies of many former Christians that they "believed" in the contemporary sense of the word, meaning they at one time gave mental assent to the claims of the Bible. However, the question is whether or not they believed in the biblical sense.

Believing Without Believing

An example of what I am getting at – when I say that it is questionable whether some former believers ever really understood the nature of what the Bible means when it uses the terms belief and faith – is found in a blog post by a former Christian, titled "I Never had Faith."

> I don't think I ever really had "faith." Or if I did, not very much of it. Let me explain. Faith is deliberately believing a proposition more strongly than evidence warrants.
>
> The thing is, I held the tenets of evangelical belief because I believed they were backed up with real, tangible evidence . . . I was raised to be an evidentialist. I was taught to follow the evidence, to pursue truth wherever it led. I was taught to never be afraid of questions, to never fear truth.
>
> Of course, I was taught all this with the assumption that all evidence and all questions lead to evangelical Christianity, but I was taught it nonetheless. As a consequence, I didn't believe anything "just because."

I believed in the Bible because I believed that the Bible contained no contradictions or errors, contained numerous fulfilled prophesies, and had been shown to be reliable by all historical and archaeological evidence available. I believed I could trust the Bible based on evidence, not on faith.

I believed in Young Earth Creationism because I believed that all the scientific evidence pointed to it. I read and read the resources offered by Answers in Genesis and the Institute for Creation Research. I read about the huge flaws in evolution and the evidence for creation and a global flood. I believed it because I had evidence, not on faith.

I believed prayer worked because we heard and read so many stories of prayer working. My own family occasionally saw answered prayers, sometimes in dramatic ways. I believed in prayer not simply on faith, but because I had seen it work, and heard stories of it working, and had read books about it working.

I believed in Jesus not simply because I had a personal relationship with him but also because I believed that historical evidence pointed conclusively not only to his existence but also to his resurrection from the dead. In fact, Christ's resurrection was one of the things I considered irrefutable proof of Christianity. Proof – evidence – not simply faith.

I never believed anything I didn't think there was evidence for. Technically, I suppose this means I didn't have "faith."

And so, when I got outside of the bubble in which I was raised and started reading things outside of evangelical Christianity, I did so with an open mind. I was not afraid of evidence. I was not afraid of questions. I'd been taught not to be.

And then I found that the Bible does contain contradictions and errors; that scientific evidence actually overwhelmingly supports evolution and contradicts Young Earth Creationism; that prayer was actually way more subjective than I'd thought; and that there is

actually no historical evidence for the resurrection or even for much of Jesus' life. I was flabbergasted.[4]

What I find interesting about the above story is how she separates believing and having faith into two distinct categories. This very modern move as I mentioned above is foreign to the Bible. She is quite clear that she believed Christianity was true and did so because in her estimation the evidence demonstrated it irrefutably. It is clear that when she uses the word believe to describe her relation to the claims of the Bible that she understands it to means that she was intellectually convinced of the truth of the Bible's claims. There is no sense of trust, but there is also no sense of doubt. She is a believer, an affirmer, one who assents to the truth of the Bible's claims.

However, after a subsequent investigation into what she once affirmed, she became persuaded that her belief was misplaced. She was in error regarding her

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[4] https://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/2012/03/i-never-had-faith.html

judgment about the truth of the Christianity. This resulted in her no longer being a believer. Here is where we see the modern disconnect between belief and faith enter the story. Since deconverting it became evident to her that although back when she identified as a Christian she believed, she never actually had faith. What can she possibly mean by that? She doesn't leave us to doubt for she defines faith as "believing a proposition more strongly than the evidence warrants."

Now on the one hand, from a biblical perspective it is impossible to be a true believer without faith. As we've seen, according to the Bible believing and having faith are synonymous. Or at least they are two sides of the same coin. It is a false dichotomy to separate the intellectual aspect of affirming the Bible's truth claims from the volitional aspect of trusting oneself to the God who stands behind them. Biblically speaking then if she really believed she also had faith since they are one and the same concept. And yet on the other hand, she is on good grounds biblically to say that she never had faith. How can that be so?

It can be so because it is obvious that she did not accept the concessive nature of faith. She was unwilling to believe the claims of the Bible beyond what she could conclusively prove. And part of faith is doing just that; committing oneself to something that is supported by evidence, but which is not conclusive.

But there is something else going on here that needs to be pointed out. When intellectual assent is the hallmark of what *it means* to have faith, intellectual doubt is seen as a sign of being faithless. In short, having faith is lacking in any doubt. This then becomes the basis for a dubious and dangerous misunderstanding, which is that the more an individual believes (i.e. has a high degree of intellectual confidence in a claim) the more faith they have. This translates into the unbiblical notion that people who never doubt are people of great faith and those who wrestle with doubt are lacking in faith. Faith becomes a "how much" word, as in how much faith do you have? And the answer is determined by how certain you are. If you have a high degree of certainty, then you have lots of faith. And vice versa. Why? Because believers believe and the more one believes the more faith they have. Thus, in the contemporary world, faith is

understood to be robust and great when it lacks any doubts and is characterized by high confidence, yea certainty in the claims of the Bible. But such an understanding is both wrongheaded and dangerous.

First of all, it misunderstands the nature of belief. Belief is not an all-or-nothing concept. It is a degreed term. Even though to believe means having a positive assessment that a particular claim is true, how positive one is that a claim is true is something that can vary. Some claims will produce in us a positive attitude that is so great we describe ourselves as being certain the claim is true. For example, I am *certain* that 2+2=4. Other times our attitude will be less positive but still quite high and we may say something like, "I am *persuaded* that my wife loves me." Or, we may only have a mildly positive attitude toward a claim and say something like "I *tend to think* that cryptocurrency is a good investment." In each example, it can be said of me that I believe the claims but, I do not hold them with equal degrees of confidence. In the first example there is no doubt about whether or not the claim is true but, in the second and third examples my confidence decreases. And yet, all three of my statements reveal that I more or less believe each one. It is only when

I cross the line from having a positive attitude toward a claim to having a neutral attitude, or no opinion, that I can be said to no longer believe it. For example, I neither believe nor deny the claim that "the Scottish national cricket team is better than the Swedish national cricket team." Knowing nothing about cricket, I have no inclination either way as to the truth of the claim that the Scots are better than the Swedes. If I have a negative attitude toward a claim, then to some degree I disbelieve it. It may only be a mildly negative assessment, as when I say "I *tend not* to believe the claim that cryptocurrency is a good investment." Or a more robustly negative assessment expressed by saying "I *deny* the claim that my wife loves me." Or a totally negative assessment of a claim expressed by "I categorically *reject* the claim that 2+2=7." Recognizing the degreed nature of belief is important in dispelling the erroneous view that belief and doubt cannot co-exist.

Second, if to believe means to have a high degree of confidence or certainty that Christianity is true, then there are few believers that have biblical belief. That's because it is nearly impossible to be a reflective or educated adult in the 21st century and not have some

questions and doubts that reduce one's confidence. And that's okay.

Third, if having biblical belief/faith involves a commitment to the person of Christ despite not being certain his claims are true, then even doubters can express biblical faith. They do so as they choose to live out the biblical story in their daily lives as if it were true. Faith is acting in accordance with what one has reason to believe is true despite doubts. This means those who act on what they are inclined to believe despite their intellectual doubts have real faith. They are true believers. Biblical faith allows belief and doubt to exist side by side. It's the cry of a father seeking deliverance for his son "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." Translation: in spite of my doubts, I have reason to believe you can help me, so I am going to act on that and beg you for help.

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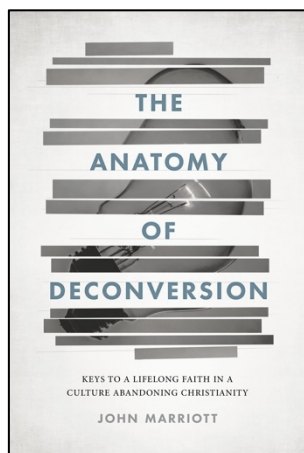
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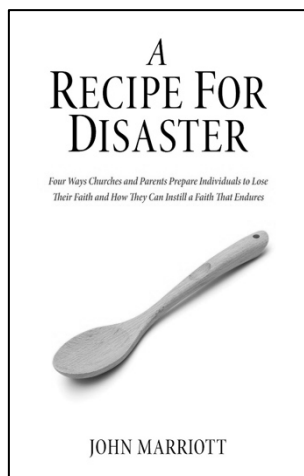
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