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

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DEDICATION

For

Ruth Zeppa

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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.

1

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.

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

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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.

3

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.

4

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.

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.

6

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

I t 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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GOING. . .GOING. . .GONE. . !

GOING. . . GOING. . .GONE. . !

GOING. . .GOING. . .GONE. . !