

Recover, Return & Restore: More Christians are deconstructing or abandoning their faith. Here's how to support their redemption

The news was jarring and disturbing, captured in this July 29, 2019, headline in *USA Today*: “He wrote the Christian case against dating. Now he’s splitting from his wife and faith.” Yes, Joshua Harris, the man who wrote the bestselling 1997 book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, the man who played a key role in what became known as “purity culture,” the man who pastored an influential megachurch in Maryland—this respected Christian leader was now leaving his wife after some 20 years of marriage and was no longer following Jesus. Joshua Harris?

Harris noted in an Instagram post that he had “undergone a massive shift in regard to [his] faith in Jesus.” He stated that he had repented “of my self-righteousness, my fear-based approach to life, the teaching of my books, my views of women in the church, and my approach to parenting, to name a few.”

He continued that he “specifically” wanted to apologize to the LGBTQ community, saying that he was “sorry” for views on sexuality he had espoused in his books and at the pulpit. “I regret standing against marriage equality, for not affirming you and your place in the church, and for any ways that my writing and speaking contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry. I hope you can forgive me.”

Yet it was this same man who, at the age of 21, authored his influential bestseller, a book that discouraged young Christian people from dating, a book that emphasized the

importance of remaining sexually pure until marriage and encouraged serious courtship leading to marriage. Now he was saying goodbye to it all.

But Harris is not the only Christian leader to renounce his faith in recent years. To the contrary, this is becoming increasingly common, to the point that there is an active call for Christians in general to follow suit and “deconvert,” often the final step in the process of “deconstruction.” Put another way, Christians are being told, “It’s time to question everything you learned, time to read the Bible through new eyes, time to put away your presuppositions and cherished beliefs and time to be brutally honest with yourself. When you do, you will no longer profess your Christian faith—at least, not in the way you once did. It’s time to be enlightened!”

Losing Faith

There had been no public hint of struggle until August 2019, when Marty Sampson, a popular Hillsong worship leader and songwriter, used his Instagram platform to announce that he was questioning his faith. This prompted me to write an article reaching out to him, saying, “My prayer is that Marty Sampson would have the integrity of heart to seek the truth earnestly, with humility and passion, and that all others with questions will put those questions on the table.”

On Aug. 13, 2019, the *Christian Post* reported that Sampson had responded to my column, clarifying he hadn’t lost his faith, but it’s “on incredibly shaky ground.” Sadly, just a little over a week later, he wrote, “It was amazing being one of you, but I’m not anymore.”

“Time for some real talk,” he explained on Instagram (before deleting the post). “I’m genuinely losing my faith...[sic] and it doesn’t bother me... like, what bothers me now is nothing... I am so happy now, so at peace with the world... [sic] it’s crazy.”

And what, in particular, caused this change of heart and mind? He continued: "How many preachers fall? Many. No one talks about it. How many miracles happen. Not many. No one talks about it. Why is the Bible full of contradictions? No one talks about it. How can God be love yet send 4 billion people to a place, all coz they don't believe? No one talks about it."

In short, he's "not in" anymore, and he desires "genuine truth." But, he claimed, "Science keeps piercing the truth of every religion. Lots of things help people change their lives, not just one version of God." He went on to say that he was "keeping it real" and that people could unfollow him if they wanted to, adding, "I've never been about living my life for others."

Of course, it is easy to respond to Sampson's concerns, as I did in my August 2019 article, reaching out to him rather than condemning him. But that doesn't diminish his own very real loss of faith, nor does it detract from the reality of his own experience, which reflects the experience of many other former Christians. In fact, the number of professing Christians within America has dropped dramatically in the last decade, from 75% to 64%, while the number of Americans who have no religious affiliation is now up to nearly 30%, according to a Pew Research Center report. It looks like Marty Sampson, an Australian, has plenty of company worldwide.

How do we explain this phenomenon, and how should we respond?

As a Jewish believer in Jesus who faced challenges from learned rabbis from my earliest days in the Lord (when I was just 16 years old and with almost no spiritual or biblical grounding), and as someone who wrestled with the objections raised by my secular professors from college to university, I can sympathize with those who struggle. I also know people lose their faith for a wide variety of reasons. But whatever the cause, I am concerned. What can we do to help? How can we

restore someone to the Lord?

I'm aware, of course, that some Christians do not believe anyone can truly fall away from the faith, citing 1 John 2:19 (NIV) in support of their views. There, John wrote, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."

This remains true to this day. Many people appear to be "with us" for a season, only to show their true colors by leaving. John refers to such people in this verse. But that is not to say that every single person who leaves the church is a false convert. Certainly not. To the contrary, it is all too easy to write off those who have departed from the faith by saying, "They never really believed."

Again, it is true that some were false converts. But many were true converts, and I take their stories seriously. Why did they renounce their faith? Was it intellectual? Was it experiential? Was it a combination of both? Did they fall morally before they changed their theology? Did church hypocrisy drive them away? Did bad theology distort their expectations?

Seeking Answers

It is to answer these questions and to respond to these concerns that I wrote my latest book, *Why So Many Christians Have Left the Faith: Responding to the Deconstructionist Movement with Unshakable, Timeless Truth*. I think it's important to ask serious questions and seek serious answers. In fact, I not only welcome such questions, but I also solicit them. Truth is our friend, not our enemy. And that's why I pulled no punches in my book, addressing the issues plainly and openly, and inviting all truth-seekers to come on a journey with me.

In my view, the current rise in apostasy can be traced to a

number of major factors. First came what I referred to as “the trickle-down effect” of atheism and agnosticism, pointing out the aggressive attack on the faith coming from the so-called New Atheists, which started to rise in prominence around 2006 and has trickled down to the culture at large, even to young people. The arguments once raised on college campuses are now couched in catchy memes shared by millions on social media. And the sentiments are simple and clear: God is not worthy of worship. He deserves mockery!

Of course, there are wonderful, beautiful, powerful, intellectually satisfying answers to atheism. And there is the insightful quote from C. S. Lewis, who describes how his atheistic arguments began to break down. He explained:

“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? ... Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.”

He was absolutely right.

Another major reason that many have fallen away is the epidemic of Christian leadership scandals, from the pulpit to the university, from charismatic circles to Baptist circles, from pastors to apologists. That’s why I devoted an entire chapter to the question “Can Christian Leaders Be Trusted?” The answer is that, in the vast majority of cases, they can. Of course, that doesn’t minimize the terrible damage done by

these scandals (and I say this not to throw stones but to speak candidly; I'm fully aware that "There but by the grace of God go I").

Another major factor in people leaving the church is the widespread cultural celebration of LGBTQ-plus activism, because of which millions of Americans have come to a simple conclusion: If gay is good, then the church is bad! Another is the politicizing of the gospel to the point that some of us became better known as followers of a particular candidate than as followers of Jesus. Worse still, some of us became just as carnal as the candidates we supported, justifying our immature behavior by quoting verses from the Bible.

Other factors that have contributed to many believers falling away are the effects of a compromised gospel (in other words, people have been hearing a faulty gospel message for decades, and the bad fruit has now ripened); the ubiquity of sinful temptation (as Jesus said, "Because iniquity will abound, the love of many will grow cold" [Matt. 24:12, MEV]); questions about the relevance and authority of the Bible (why should we care about what this antiquated book has to say?); and questions about divine morality, especially the issue of hell (as Chapter 9 in my book asks, "How Could a Good God Send Billions of People to Hell?").

Strengthening Our Faith

But here's the good news. With every problem, there is a solution. With every question, there is an answer. And I truly believe that if we seek God and His truth with all our heart and soul and mind, with humility and patience, we will be richly rewarded. Our faith will become even stronger!

As I wrote in the last chapter of *Why So Many Christians Have Left the Faith*:

"Is it healthy to question what you believe? Is it good to examine the sources of your faith? Or is this a dangerous

practice, a matter of opening up a Pandora's box of doubts and questions, even to the point of giving place to the devil? It all depends on the motivation of your heart and the types of questions you are asking.

If your intent is to mock, undermine and destroy, likely you have already made up your mind, and you can easily find confirmation for your cynicism and scorn. But if you have honest questions or serious doubts and if your intent is to get to the truth, whatever the cost or consequence, then asking these questions can be healthy indeed. Your heart and mind can be in harmony."

As for my own life experience, I love scholarship. I love critical study. When I was in college, I studied Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Latin, German and Yiddish. In graduate school, I added Ugaritic, Aramaic, Syriac, Akkadian (meaning, Babylonian and Assyrian), Phoenician and French, plus some other, smaller dialects. I love to dig deep when I study!

I have written commentaries on Jeremiah and Job, and I'm currently working on a commentary on Isaiah. My doctoral dissertation focused on *one Hebrew word*. So yes, I find great value in serious academic study, and that includes asking critical, difficult questions. And over the decades my studies have increased, not decreased, my confidence in the veracity of God's Word.

But when the Lord asks me to trust Him, it's because He has proven Himself faithful to me over these decades. My trust is based on relationship, first and foremost. And when I fall on my face and worship Him, it is because of His beauty, holiness and goodness rather than because of an insight I gleaned about biblical Hebrew.

Yet I'm not asking you to believe just because I do. I'm not asking you to take my word. I'm asking you to join me on a journey of discovery, of truth, of reality, whether you're a

solid believer who can't relate to doubt or someone who tried to believe but are riddled with doubt. I have written my book to help and strengthen you. I also invite you to explore the contents of the website, where I address many of the most pressing issues of the day. There are thousands of hours of free resources waiting for you there.

I am 100% sure that God is absolutely faithful and that His Word is absolutely trustworthy—and I say that having experienced the tragedies and pains of life, like everyone else who has lived long enough, and having been challenged for decades by brilliant rabbis and professors and activists and nonbelievers of every stripe.

But that is my story, and you have your own. My prayer is that in the days ahead, as you seek the Lord and pursue the truth earnestly, He will bring you to a deeper place of certainty in your faith so that you become secure in Him, enjoying the Lord with both heart and mind, thriving rather than living in doubt and pain.

That can be a reality for you too!

Michael L. Brown, Ph.D., is founder and president of AskDrBrown Ministries and the president of FIRE School of Ministry. The author of over 40 books, he is host of the syndicated daily talk radio show The Line of Fire. His syndicated columns appear on leading websites, and his scholarly publications range from biblical commentaries to articles in Semitic journals. He has served as an adjunct or visiting professor at seven seminaries and debated gay activists, agnostic professors and Orthodox rabbis on university campuses.