

How Spirit-Led Christians Must Respond When Prominent Leaders Fall Away From Jesus

Words like “rejection,” “abandonment” and “desertion” have echoed in Christian circles lately, in the wake of public announcements from two Christian leaders that their faith is not what it once was.

Josh Harris, pastor and author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, published on Instagram last month that “by all the measurements I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.” And then Marty Sampson, musician and singer-songwriter for Hillsong Church in Australia, posted that he was “genuinely losing” his faith, although he later deleted that post and amended that his faith is on “shaky ground.”

In the New Testament, Paul compares the church to a body. He writes in 1 Corinthians 12:5, “For as a body is one and has many parts, and all the many parts of that one body are one body, so also is Christ.” These verses in 1 Corinthians are usually used to emphasize the unity of Christian community and the various roles each of us have within the church.

But what do we do with verses like this when members desert the body?

Some have accused Harris and Sampson of never being Christians in the first place, while others have emphasized the need for understanding and grace.

Franklin Graham, Christian evangelist and political pundit, is one of the former. In an interview with FOX Nation Host Todd Starnes, Graham said of Harris and Sampson, “I don’t recognize them as leaders. These are very young people, and I doubt whether they even have a very strong faith, or if they even

had a faith at all to begin with ... I feel sorry for them. They're in a very dangerous place to be out from under God's protection."

Don Carson, on the other hand, theologian and founder of the Gospel Coalition, challenged Graham's assumption that those who doubt "were never Christians to begin with."

"They don't have labels on their foreheads," Carson said. "So it might be that they need listening to and praying over, praying with, and so on. They might come back. I could tell you some remarkable stories of people who wandered away ... who nevertheless returned to the Lord a couple of decades later."

These takes are wildly different in content, but they have one thing in common: an exclusive focus on the individual in question. But what about the rest of us?

An article by Laurie Nichols in *Christianity Today*, "When Those Who Wander Aren't Lost," offers another perspective: namely, how Harris and Sampson's recent confessions involve us, as Christians, too.

If we are truly the body of Christ, maybe we should also talk about us not abandoning them.

Nichols writes, "So the reality, made even more prominent by these popular Christian leaders' public professions, is before us: Many, too many, are questioning what it really means to be a Christian today." She goes on to say, however, that this doesn't have to be a bad thing. It can be an opportunity for all of us to take a good, hard look at our Christian beliefs and lifestyles.

Because Harris and Sampson are not the only people rethinking their faith. As Nichols says, "We need to be clear on one thing, and that is this: What these men are saying in public, thousands, perhaps millions, are wrestling with in private."

You could probably immediately come up with a list of people in your life who are in similar straits. People who have drifted away from God, angry or disillusioned or questioning—or all of the above.

“We are living in a time when our faith is tested frequently,” observes Nichols. “It is no longer possible (if it ever was) to gather in a holy huddle, fingers in ears, humming ‘La, la, la.’”

It’s complicated to be a Christian right now. The world is full of pain and trauma and injustice, things that crop up just as much inside Christianity as outside it.

Nichols offers a few thoughts about how to respond to people abandoning faith.

—She says we can rediscover lament, which she defines as, “The deep cry in our souls that all is not right and that our deepest questions are borne out of the conviction that things ought not be as they are.” We have to be able to mourn that which grieves us.

—And we can also open ourselves to be people of God by taking time for those who wander or doubt. She writes, “Our sitting with those who question the faith—and even those who have fallen away from the faith—not only can allow those who struggle to feel heard, but allow for us to feel connected to God and others as we discover God answer the hard questions we place before Him.”

Basically, sitting with those who question can be an opportunity for us to forge deeper connections and acknowledge the reality of doubt in all of our lives.

So something about reading Nichols’ article helped me think about 1 Corinthians 12 differently. Verses 24-26 say, “But God has composed the body... that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one

another. If one part suffers, all suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts rejoice with it.”

Maybe these verses also give us a way to frame our thoughts about Harris and Sampson leaving the church and/or renouncing their faith. Because what if, as the body of Christ, we are called to resist the tide of people abandoning their faith—not by growing angry and condemning them but pursuing them with understanding and support?

We can never assume that we know the status of their salvation. All we can know when someone wanders is that a brother or sister is struggling. But, if God doesn’t give up on them, then neither can we.

In Ezekiel 34:11b, God promises, “I, even I, will search for My sheep and seek them out.” And again, in Isaiah 43:4 (ESV), He says, “Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.”

God is not a God who gives up on people. Maybe one biblical way to respond to the announcements of the Harrises and Sampsons of the world is to join Him in the fight. Perhaps we can be soldiers, fighting to help reclaim what belongs to the God we believe in.

We cannot ultimately be the rescuers, of course, but we can act on the belief that rescue is imminent, and help others hold on until it comes. {eo}

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