

Case Studies: De-conversion: From Christianity to Atheism

Apologetics - Defending and Declaring the Evidence for Biblical Christianity

"15 ...if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it [Greek - "apologia"]. 16 But do this in a gentle and respectful way..." 1 Peter 3 15-16 NLT

OVERVIEW

Dr. John Marriott, adjunct professor in Philosophy and Intercultural Studies at Biola University, states, "The number of people who once identified as believers but no longer do is increasing at record numbers and record rates... And not just nominal folks. There [are] former pastors, missionaries, worship leaders and seminary grads."¹ Puzzled by this troubling trend, he began to do research to discover the reason why.

Dr. Marriott explained that determining the exact numbers of people deconverting is difficult to determine. In 2007, LifeWay Research reported that 70 percent of students lose their faith shortly after entering college. They added that only 35 percent eventually return to faith. (See **2 Timothy 4:2-4**).

OPTIONS

When people denounce Christianity they may adopt one of several new identities. (1) Some claim to have become an **atheist** (they disbelieve in God). (2) Others may not go as far as atheism and call themselves an **agnostic** (uncertain what to believe; they just don't know). (3) Yet others identify as "**nones**" (They are not necessarily an atheist, possibly still believe in God, or some higher intelligence, but do not identify with any kind of religion or group). (4) A fourth group are the "spiritual but not religious" who are similar to "nones" but are likely to explore various forms of spirituality (cults, Eastern religions, mystic philosophy, the occult, etc.).

EXAMPLES

Some well known people who once claimed to be a Christian but now identify as atheist.

Q1. Read each profile. Why did these once professing Christians turn to atheism? What do you think was missing in their spiritual life & development?

- **George Perdikis** - co-founder of christian rock band, The Newsboys.

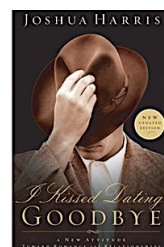
Perdikis wrote about his faith journey "I always felt uncomfortable with the strict rules imposed by Christianity. All I wanted to do was create and play rock and roll... and yet most of the attention I received was focused on how well I maintained the impossible standards of religion. I wanted my life to be measured by my music, not by my ability to resist temptation."



- **Joshua Harris** - a former evangelical pastor of a megachurch in Maryland who also wrote a best-selling book criticizing modern dating, "*I Kissed Dating Goodbye*." Published in 1997, announced that he is no longer a Christian and that he is divorcing his wife, Shannon Bonne.



On His Christian faith, Harris explained, "I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is 'deconstruction,' the biblical phrase is 'falling away.' By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian. Many people tell me that there is a different way to practice faith and I want to remain open to this, but I'm not there now."



Also, Harris wrote on Instagram an apology, "I have lived in repentance for the past several years—repenting 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. But I specifically want to add to this list now: to the LGBTQ+ community, I want to say that I am sorry for the views that I taught in my books and as a pastor regarding sexuality. 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."

- **Bart D. Ehrman** - born October 5, 1955) is an American New Testament scholar focusing on textual criticism of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, and the origins and development of early Christianity. He has written and edited 30 books, including three college textbooks.



Ehrman tells how he was a born-again, fundamentalist Christian as a teenager. He recalls being certain that God had inspired the wording of the Bible and protected it from all error. He desired to understand the Bible in the original languages and studied Koine Greek and textual criticism. However, during his graduate studies, he became convinced that the biblical manuscripts had contradictions and discrepancies that he could not reconcile. He became a liberal Christian for 15 years, but later announced that he was an agnostic atheist. He struggled particularly with the philosophical problems of evil and suffering.²

¹ Interview, *The Problem of Christians becoming atheists*, by Randal Rauser, <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/the-problem-of-christians-becoming-atheists.html>

² See William Lane Craig's comments about Bart D. Ehrman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zANI-OcPnfl>

REASONS FOR DE-CONVERSION

Dr. John Marriott, mentions at least three reasons or factors for why some are rejecting their faith.

1. Misunderstanding What It Means to Be A Christian.

Dr. Marriott explained, "The first is mistaking a particular take or interpretation of Christianity for Christianity itself... For example, a common refrain among the deconverted is that they were told that the creation account had to be a literal 6 day, 24-hour period of time. If not, the rest of the Bible had no foundation and thus no justification for its claim that we are sinners in need of a savior. When, for various reasons, they came to the conclusion that the universe was billions of years old they felt that they could no longer be Christians. For them, being a Christian meant "believing in literal 6 day creation". In rejecting the young-earth view they assumed they were rejecting Christianity. In reality they were only rejecting a doctrinally bloated take on Christianity they mistook for the real thing."³

Q2. *What are some common misconceptions people have about salvation?*

2. Disappointment with God or Christianity.

Dr. Marriott explained, "The second factor is unmet expectations. When God and/or the Bible doesn't live up to what deconverts expect a crisis of faith results. The problem, of course, is not God or the Bible but what many deconverts were taught to expect from the God or the Bible.

Q3. *What are some ways people become disappointed with God and/or Christianity?*

3. Properly Communicating Biblical Christianity to Modern Culture.

Dr. Marriott added that a third factor is that Christians have not done a good job of explaining the Christian faith to a world that has become secular. People no longer assume that God exists and Christianity is true as it was in the past. Former Christians who now claim to be atheist think it is embarrassing to believe in God and the Bible. Former Christians ask, how "...can an intelligent, educated person accept the biblical story of two naked people, a talking snake and a magical tree, at face value given the world we live in? Or that a man lived inside a fish for three days, people lived over 900 years, and the dead come back to life?

Q4. *What other parts of the Bible do you think secular people find difficult to believe?*

Dr. Marriott explains, "For many former Christians, the 'Old, Old, Story' sounded more like an ancient fairy tale than it did sober history. Believing in fairy tales is embarrassing. Children, not adults believe fairy tales, and no one wants to be considered an intellectual child."⁴

³ Interview, by Randal Rauser.

⁴ Ibid

RESPONSE

CONVICTION - A person who has genuinely experienced the New Birth, will not renounce God and Christ and become an atheist. SEE John 3:1-10; Matthew 7:21-23; 2 Timothy 4:2-4; 1 John 2:19

A genuine believer may have periods when he has doubts (John 20:24-29) or even backslide into carnality (1 Corinthians 3:1-3), but the new birth is a transformation of the heart (Titus 3:4-7) resulting in the believer becoming a new person (2 Corinthians 5:17). This transformation prevents a believer from being able to denounce God.

Important observations about the New Birth - John 3:1-10

- The New Birth is essential to enter heaven (3:3).
- The New Birth is more than being good, religious, sincere, and knowledgeable of the Bible. Nicodemus was all these things (3:1, 3, 10) yet needed to be born again (3:3, 7).
- The New Birth is a conception of spiritual life [a new nature] distinct from the physical birth (3:4-7).
- The New Birth is an individual choice, whereas, no one has a choice in their natural birth (3:4, 6).
- The New Birth is a work of the Holy Spirit changing a person from the inside out (3:5-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Q5. *When the New Birth is properly understood, why would a person who has been genuinely born again not denounce Jesus or God?*

Those Who Depart Are Not Genuine Believers

1 John 2:19 Amplified Bible (AMP)

"They went out from us [seeming at first to be Christians], but they were not really of us [because they were not truly born again and spiritually transformed]; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out [teaching false doctrine], so that it would be clearly shown that none of them are of us."

Q6. *What did John say about those who had left them? How does this apply to the discussion of the de-converted?*

People Who Are Mistaken about Their Salvation

Matthew 7:21-23 NLT

"21 Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. 22 On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' 23 But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'"

Q7. *How do we know that some people mistakenly think they are saved when they really are not (v. 23)? How does this apply to the discussion of the de-converted?*

Q8. *How could apologetics possibly prevent de-conversion?*