



“Great is Thy Faithfulness”:

Some Reflections on the Loss of Faith

by Ruth A. Tucker

Dan Everett was born and raised in a tough town in California on the Mexican border. Life seemed to be going nowhere until he met Keren Graham. The daughter of missionaries to Brazil, she invited him to come with her to church. One thing led to another and they got married—but not before he got born again in 1968. “I felt that my life had changed completely,” he recalls, “that I had stepped from darkness into light.”

Three babies came along quickly, as did a diploma in missions for Dan from Moody Bible Institute in 1976. After Moody they made plans to join Wycliffe Bible Translators after they had completed the Summer Institute of Linguistics course, followed by field training in Chiapas, Mexico. In 1977 they were assigned to work in Brazil among the Piraha people whose language had heretofore stumped even some of the most sophisticated linguists.

During their home assignments, Dan took graduate education in linguistics and his life changed. In fact they left the mission field for his university teaching. But as he remembers, “I began to feel that academics was a hollow and insignificant way to spend one’s life.” So in 1999, the family returned to the Piraha village—this time with a two-room house, a generator, and all the amenities of modern life, including a stove, a water system, a freezer, TV, and DVD player. Soon he had translated the Book of Luke, with plans for other books of the Bible to follow.

Despite the difficulties with the language and culture, both Dan and Keren were dedicated to the tribal people and were determined to break through the language barrier. Today their bond with the people is stronger than ever, but their bond of marriage has broken. Keren continues to work with

Wycliffe, while Dan studies the language as a professor and independent linguist. Keren seeks to learn the language in order to bring the gospel to this native tribe, while Dan admits he is now an atheist. “As I read more and I got into philosophy and met a lot of friends who weren’t Christians,” he recalls, “it became difficult for me to sustain the belief structure in the supernatural.”

But Dan’s faith did not evaporate in an instant or even in a matter of a few months or years. His doubts and unbelief slowly brought him to the point of admitting publicly that he no longer believed in God.

Dan’s story is not as unusual as we might imagine. Most such missionaries and ministers and evangelists, however, are in the closet. Of all the sins discussed among contemporary Christians, unbelief is the most taboo. A little doubting here and there is deemed good for the soul, but not unbelief. So it festers beneath the surface, often hidden from even close family members.

From a missiological perspective, ones who have left the faith are generally ignored—as are those who may continue to hold to the beliefs of earlier years but are no longer participating in worship or involved in any other church activities. Perhaps here is what we might define as another “people group.” As with other such categories of individuals, we begin by seeking to understand who they are—through case studies and other means.

Common Myths

In my research for *Walking Away from Faith*, I identified five common myths about people who lose their faith. Here is a list ready-made for challenge, including additions and deletions:



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1. Those who lose faith are rebellious and angry.
2. Those who lose faith can be argued back.
3. Those with serious doubts should go to Bible college or seminary.
4. Those who walk away from faith do so to live a promiscuous lifestyle.
5. Those who lose faith were never sincere Christians to begin with.

It is simply not true that leaving the faith is prompted by the kind of rebellion we associate with a teenager who refuses to participate in family outings or church. The stories more often show initial hesitance and anguish and fear of alienating friends and relatives.

That people can be argued back to faith if we use the best apologetics is also false. In fact, many of those who lose their faith do so while seeking to argue others back to faith. These individuals are often enthusiastic and very bright Christians with a high degree of confidence—or as some would say, arrogance.

The notion that Bible colleges and seminaries offer secure protection from doubt and unbelief is not sustained by statistics. In fact, when the environment seeks to curb hard questions and doubt or to marginalize the doubter, such institutions can serve as an incubator for unbelief. The strictest regulations often foster an atmosphere of doubt.

That individuals walk away from faith in order to live a profligate lifestyle is not supported by the literature. Christians must be cautious about pointing the finger. They themselves are prominent among the Enron CEOs and elected officials who hire prostitutes—to say nothing of televangelists and megachurch ministers. It is true that some walk away from faith to feel more comfortable in gay or lesbian relationships. But many testify that they walked away because they could no longer live a lie—that they had tried to hide their unbelief but conscience got the best of them.

That people who walk away from faith were never really sincere Christians is an issue more closely related to theology than to character or sincerity. Theologically, the matter of losing faith is a topic

that many people find troubling—especially those who hold fast to a belief in eternal security. From an Arminian perspective, the matter is easier to handle; people who lose their faith need to be re-evangelized and “saved” and brought back into the fold. For Reformed folks, on the other hand, a true experience of saving grace is a matter of God’s election and is something that cannot simply be undone.

Yet, apart from one’s theological perspective, there is surely the appearance of people losing faith—and not just the university student who abandons the faith of earlier years. Even among the most outwardly

committed evangelists and ministers there are ones who have served faithfully for many years, only to walk away from it all. The theological implications are important, but it is also critical to consider this matter from a missiological perspective.

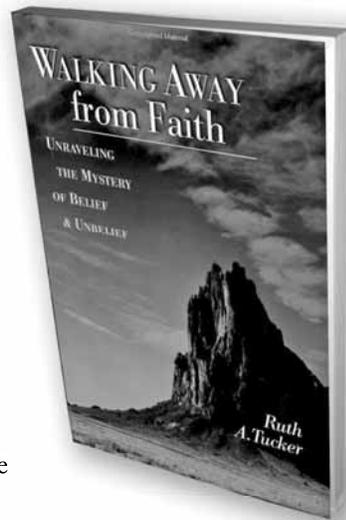
There are two aspects of mission to highlight as we consider the matter of walking away from faith. The first is preventative and the second is curative. Such a medical metaphor, however, is probably not helpful. Most individuals who have walked away from faith do not regard themselves diseased—nor should we. The most helpful way to move beyond such common perceptions is to interact openly with ones who have left the faith, as I did with Rob and Kim some years ago. Both had been raised

Catholic, but as young adults became “born again” believers and joined the Reformed Baptist church, where they were actively involved for more than a dozen years.

“I would have given my life for the faith,” Rob recalls. “Fifteen years ago, I couldn’t have imagined in my wildest dreams that I could be sitting here tonight telling you I am an atheist.”

His story is one I have heard and read over and over again. First there were questions—relatively minor questions—regarding apparent biblical inconsistencies. Then major questions and unresolved issues. And finally the whole system seemed to crumble and crash. The journey from fundamentalism to liberalism to agnosticism took several years. “I could never go back,” says Rob. “Never.”

If there was one thing that most impressed me during the visit, it was how likable and engaging Rob and Kim were. Intelligent and well-read, the parents of three children, they communicated easily with each other and with me, and there was no reason to



doubt that they had found a measure of happiness in life—happiness that Rob insisted did not characterize their life of faith. They were experiencing the routine ups and downs of what seemed to be a very normal life. This is not the picture of a happy family life that Evangelicals allow themselves to imagine.

Why do people leave the faith? This is another question that requires a response if we are going to approach the subject from a missiological perspective.

Reasons for Losing Faith

In my research I have found that rarely is there one single issue that precipitates loss of faith. And apart from so-called reasons, there is an environment in the Western world, and within Christianity, that makes the loss of faith an easy transition—or if not that, at least an acceptable transition.

In Europe and North America, religious beliefs are often relegated to the private world and not part of the public cultural world as a whole. The loss of faith

is a private matter, not a community or even family matter. Furthermore, North American political democracy and religious denominationalism also provide an environment for unbelief. Religion has become very democratic; we pick and chose our particular set of beliefs, and among the many choices are varieties of unbelief.

Enlightenment rationalism and scientific discoveries have also had an impact. In many ways modernism still

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I have identified five broad categories of reasons for people losing faith. Here again is a list ready-made for challenge, including additions and deletions:

1. Scientific and philosophical issues, particularly evolution and naturalism.
2. Biblical perplexities and higher criticism.
3. Disappointment with God regarding personal and wide-scale suffering.
4. Hypocrisy and lack of caring among leaders in the church.
5. Lifestyle and perspective, including homosexuality, feminism, secularism, and pluralism.

As with all lists, this is a skeletal beginning. It is designed to challenge us to think missiologically, while at the same time helping us grasp how complex and varied these matters are.

How Do We Respond?

Before attempting to answer that question we need to contemplate how not to respond. Some years ago James Bruckner posted an online story entitled, “The Anguish of Leaving the Faith.” Here he explained how he and his wife abandoned their faith of many years—causing great pain for his wife’s family and for the Evangelical church community in which they had been actively involved.

It was not his neglect of his faith that created doubts, but his study of Scripture—while “giving Christianity every benefit of the doubt.” He tried to overlook the difficulties, assuming there were resolutions he had not discovered. “However, the more I studied, the more numerous and prominent the difficulties became.” Then one day before Christmas, he sat down and opened his Bible for his daily devotions and as he stared at the pages he admitted to himself that he did not believe it anymore. He initially kept his unbelief to himself, but when he stepped down from leading a small group and stopped going to church those close to him became suspicious. Responding to an accusatory letter from his father-in-law, he expressed the struggles he was facing:

Our loss of faith is something that happened to us while we were doing the things that Christians are supposed to do—not something that we willfully or maliciously decided The whole process has been wrenching for us, and, like you, I have lost many hours of sleep because of it. However . . . to affirm something that is impossible for me to believe would be lying, and I cannot do it with a clear conscience It is because we wanted to maintain good family relations that we did not reveal our loss of faith when it first occurred. We wanted to slowly move away from the faith to give you all a chance to get used to the idea and spare you the shock. But we were found out by accident, and so now we all must deal with it

James also received a letter from his pastor. How should a pastor respond to such disclosures? Should he express love and friendship and some words of appreciation for the years of service that James and his wife had given to the church? Should he listen to their story and try to comprehend what they were saying—and confess his own doubts and struggles? Might he ask if they were demanding too much from their faith—for example, proofs that the Christian faith never promises? Should he express his deep disappointment that they felt it necessary to separate from the church family—encouraging them to at



Is There a Cure for This Ongoing Problem?

least remain a part of social activities? Should he assure them he would be available to help them during these troubled times in the family or at work? Here is how his pastor responded:

You have not had a "Loss of faith". You have believed a lie (Romans). You are a smart man, James, but you are not smarter than Jesus! . . . You are a smart man, but not likely any smarter than King David, King Solomon, Moses, the Apostle Paul, and other historical figures who were smart enough to believe in God . . . You are a smart man. Seek wisdom. Don't be the fool who has said in his heart that there is no God! You are a smart man, James, but you are not smarter than God. Humble yourself under his mighty hand! . . . I will count it a privilege and an act of friendship to help you back when you are ready.

James' pastor exhibits all the marks of insecurity—a man who is threatened by this disclosure of unbelief. It is not his responsibility to argue or to shame James back into the faith. He should not have reacted so sharply but instead encouraged James not to make any final decisions right away. He should have urged him and Allison to allow the children to continue their church activities and for the whole family to

continue sharing in social outings. And James, he might have said, we just can't get along without you playing shortstop again this year.

Some years ago, a second-career seminary student told me his story. David had previously been in seminary when he lost his faith. In the twenty years that followed, he married, raised children, earned an engineering degree followed by a law degree, and was making a sizable six-figure income. He considered himself an agnostic. Then his daughter became involved in a church youth program. He and his wife attended a Sunday service featuring music by her youth group. His mind wandered through the prayers and Bible reading and sermon, but on the last hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness," he began weeping—so hard that he had to walk out of the service. That was the first step of his recommitment to faith. Today he is in full-time ministry.

God's ways are mysterious. David's emotional return to faith makes absolutely no sense on a rational level. Sometimes we do well to step aside and trust in God about whom we can sing with assurance: "Great is Thy Faithfulness." f

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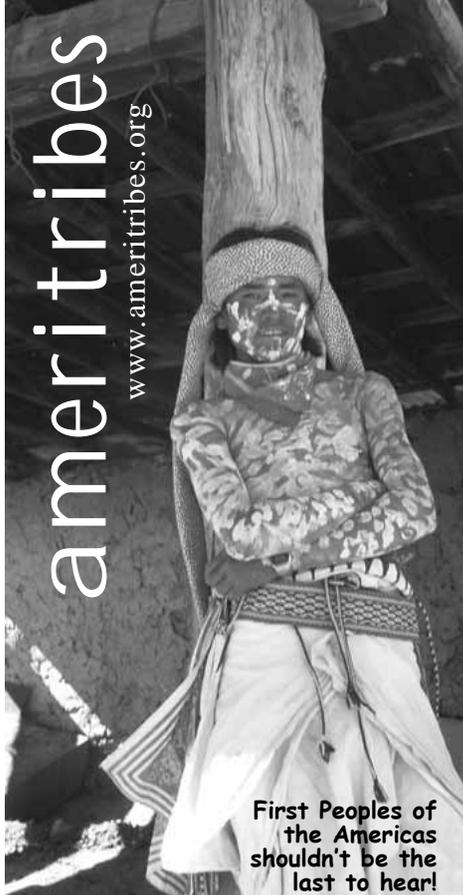


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