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WITNESSING TO THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN FROM FAITH

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Christians, in their witnessing, are accustomed to giving a presentation of the gospel and offering their personal testimony. What if, however, the reaction of our evangelistic audience is something like this: "I know what the gospel message is. I once believed it myself, but not anymore" or, "I once had a testimony like yours, but I am no longer a Christian."

These troubling responses, regrettably, are becoming more commonplace. Support groups for ex-Christians, such as Fundamentalists Anonymous (FA), are gaining prominence; the FA Web site receives tens of thousands of visitors each month, and the Internet is rife with "antitestimonies" of those who once confessed belief in Christ but have abandoned their faith. A few have joined cults or other religions, but the majority have retreated into some form of skepticism. How is the witnessing Christian to respond to the "ex-Christian" for whom the Good News is "old news"?¹

Intellectual Objections. An informal survey conducted by a Web site support group for ex-Christians indicates that two-thirds of respondents began to question Christianity because of some intellectual difficulty. The largest portion (28.5 percent) cited "theological/doctrinal problems" as their reason for questioning their faith; another 27 percent claimed that their faith "no longer made sense" or that they "grew out of it." Ten percent cited "Bible contradictions" as their reason to initially question Christianity.²

All three of these areas are concerns of Christian apologetics, and the sort of intellectual problems these persons faced, as related in exemplary antitestimonies from the same Web site, reveal familiar questions; for example: Is free will compatible with God's sovereignty? Is eternal punishment just? Is the theory of evolution compatible with Genesis? In one sense, therefore, preparation for encounters with those who have fallen from faith is no different than preparation for those who have never professed Christ. The intellectual objections we encounter will usually be the same, and the importance of providing sound answers is magnified by the fact that some antitestimonies cite the provision of unsatisfactory answers as a factor in deconversion. One such story relates what happened when the author wrote to a radio ministry seeking resolution to a common claim of biblical contradiction: "Instead of an intellectual [sic] satisfying apologetic, they merely admonished that some things could only be answered through the eyes of faith. I pretty much got the same answer everywhere I went."³ Having adequate answers (or knowing where to get them) clearly should be one of our priorities as Christians. It will not be sufficient to tell seekers to "have faith," while ignoring their questions.

The Attitude Factor. We will sometimes encounter ex-Christians who manifest extremist reactions toward those who present the gospel message. Those who react this way will often have a sense that they have been relieved of a burden of deception when they forsook Christianity, and will come to the discussion with the attitude that they will not be "fooled" again. They may dismiss even sound or scholarly arguments as "excuses," or as biased or insufficient, either without rational justification or with a preemptive *ad hoc* argument. They may assume that their "liberation" is a sign of advanced reasoning skills, and thus presume themselves to be the intellectual superior of any person still in faith; thus, they automatically think a Christian will have nothing of value to say to them. For such persons, the years that they spent as Christians are looked on as time wasted going in the wrong direction, and evangelists are merely perpetrators of the lie that originally ensnared them.

This attitude manifests itself in a variety of ways. Some ex-Christians are openly hostile and gratuitously profane. Some become “anti-evangelists” who attempt to deconvert others. One of the most popular examples of an anti-evangelist is Dan Barker, a former preacher who now heads an activist group called the Freedom from Religion Foundation. Barker authored his own antitestimony titled *Losing Faith in Faith*, which contains his story of leaving the Christian church, and several chapters of standard “Bible contradictions” and problems. Today he speaks widely and publicly debates prominent Christian apologists in furtherance of his organization’s agenda; yet the quality of many of his arguments makes it clear that he is an example of an ex-Christian whose hostility has overcome his better judgment.⁴

Those persons who wear their “ex-Christianity” on their sleeve pose a serious challenge to Christian evangelists. If we present the truth in love, and it is rejected with open hostility or even profane derision, there will come a point after which we are obliged to heed Jesus’ counsel to shake the dust from our feet and move on (Mark 6:11). We may keep a door open for later discussion, but Jesus clearly indicates that we are not required to indulge those who harbor irrational resentment at the expense of those who seek honest intellectual resolution.

Minimal Investment. The hostility of some who call themselves former Christians may emerge in direct correspondence with the level of personal investment they had in their faith when they were professing believers. Some who once professed Christianity may not have had what we would regard as a serious commitment and may be more receptive to our evangelistic efforts. This category of persons who “grew out of it” may include those who attended church weekly and would have called themselves Christians, but because they never took the time to learn more about Christianity, they simply abandoned it. It may be effective to politely question these persons about the nature of their former beliefs and uncover any misconceptions they may have had about difficult doctrines. A reasoned and intelligent defense of any particular point about Christianity can open the door for them to consider that perhaps Christianity deserves a second look. We may also find it helpful to bring into the discussion someone who was once a skeptic but became a Christian, and can thus provide direct guidance along the same path.

Subjective Objections. In the survey noted above, approximately 6 percent cited “actions of other Christians” as their reason for questioning their faith, while 5 percent cited “personal tragedy.” The balance of respondents either were not Christians when they started questioning Christianity or cited some other reason, such as, “wanted to start sinning” (1 percent).

These three points represent the most common nonrational (emotional/sensual) objections to Christianity, and as with intellectual objections, they certainly are not unique to ex-Christians. The first two are simply variations on standard arguments such as, How can a religion of love perpetrate something like the Crusades? or, How could a good God have allowed 9/11? When argued by an ex-Christian, however, such questions add certain complications to our response. Though we would certainly approach these objections with a concerned and sympathetic ear, the ex-Christian may say that he or she has personally suffered too much pain or emotional distress to consider Christianity again. The logical point that the truth of a religion’s claims is not determined by the actions of its followers may seem empty and hollow to this sort of person. Our evangelism may become as much gentle counseling as it is presenting the truth in love. In other cases, however, “actions of other Christians” may refer to political or moral stances by leading Christians that the person has found offensive (e.g., reactions against homosexuality or support for a particular military action), which means that we once again may enter into the realm of evidential apologetics.

The last reason given, “wanted to start sinning,” requires cautions against two extremes. First, we must not make the mistake of assuming that a desire to sin was the real reason behind a person’s deconversion. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that some will use philosophical or other reasons as a cover for this sort of desire, (particularly where something like sexual freedom is concerned); nevertheless, unless invited to do so, it is best to avoid becoming a “spiritual psychologist” and instead stick to discussing tangible issues as much as possible.

Multicultural Motivation. One final factor to consider, especially in our age of postmodern thought, is the presentation of religious diversity as a factor in deconversion. Ex-Christians may cite differing views

of various Christian denominations as a reason for their dissatisfaction, reasoning that a body that does not have its own house in order certainly cannot be trusted to put others' houses in order. On a larger scale, they may argue that humanity itself has too many differing religious orientations, making it more likely that none at all are correct.

This argument is problematic on many points; but we may illustrate its unreasonableness by appealing to an area in which the person who is making it is committed. If the person is a political activist, for example, we might point out that differing views between political parties, and even within parties, certainly should not compel someone to reject being a political activist or standing for a political cause in which he or she believes! In the final analysis, an argument like this is not a search for truth, but a case of surrendering because searching for the truth has proven to be more work than was desired. A person who cites diversity of religious faith as a reason for having no faith at all is merely cutting off his nose to spite his face.

The professing ex-Christian poses a significant challenge for the Christian evangelist, but it is a challenge that can be met successfully. Intellectual and emotional preparation remains much the same as for an encounter with any other person. The difference lies in the need to be sensitive to the specific needs of those for whom faith and practice in Christ is either a painful recollection or an imperfect reflection.

— James Patrick Holding

NOTES

1. The question of whether a Christian is "once saved, always saved," and the salvation of purported Christians prior to their deconversion, is beyond the scope of this article.
2. Survey results originally posted at vanallens.com, <http://www.vanallens.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=1272> (Accessed October 15, 2004).
3. Dave VanAllen, "'A Sabbatical?' or 'My Anti-Testimony,'" Exchristian.net, <http://exchristian.net/exchristian/2002/04/sabbatical-or-my-anti-testimony.php>.
4. For example, he criticizes the Golden Rule ("Do to others as you would have them do to you) on the absurd grounds that a masochist could use it as justification to "do to others" the same things the masochist does to himself! Dan Barker, *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist* (Madison, WI: Freedom from Religion Foundation, 1992), 347–48.