

Voices: De-conversion stories and Christian hope

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A few weeks ago, Joshua Harris—a former evangelical megachurch pastor and the author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*—announced that he no longer considers himself a Christian.

Harris's de-conversion narrative spurred various commentaries from other evangelical leaders. Grove City College professor Carl Trueman and singer John Cooper, among others, have [offered comments](#) on this phenomenon. I would like to offer some of my own.

I de-converted from Christianity when I was 17 years old. Since then, I not only have returned to the faith, but also have pursued a calling to pastoral ministry and advanced education in theology.

Leaving Christianity

I am an inveterate nerd. I have a habit of subjecting everything I care about to extreme over-analysis. From Star Wars and Led Zeppelin to politics and philosophy, I have spent much of my life peering long and hard into the little details of subjects that interest me. It was only natural for Christianity to receive the same treatment.

Unfortunately, my amateur research into theology, church history and biblical studies started turning up questions and problems I was thoroughly unequipped to deal with. Even more unfortunately, the church environment in which I grew up lacked people who were equipped.

The questions and doubts began to pile up until I couldn't take it anymore.

I had no idea to whom or where I could turn for answers, so I decided there weren't any. I decided Christianity was a farce, a lie built on ignoring inconvenient realities.

It wasn't simply the questions and doubts that killed my faith. What really did it was the sense I had been lied to. I was encountering problems and difficulties no one had ever told me existed. I assumed the churches in which I grew up either were ignorant of these realities, or worse, they deliberately had hidden them from me so I wouldn't ask hard questions.

Returning to Christianity

I never made my de-conversion public. In fact, it was a closely guarded secret the entire time. For months, I hardly told anyone. I didn't even tell my parents; I didn't want them to think they had failed me.

At first, I felt liberated from the chains of a regressive and ignorant religion. But I soon fell into depression, bitterness and self-loathing. I hated everyone and everything.

What brought me back? It's simple: The Good Shepherd left the 99 sheep to find the lost one.

It was the middle of winter, and I was out on an evening walk. The more I walked, the deeper I plunged into bitter and loathsome thoughts. Eventually, I grew overwhelmed. I curled up on the sidewalk and began to sob.

Eventually, I managed to choke out: "God, I can't keep going like this. If you're out there, if you're real and you care, give me something. Give me *anything!*"

What happened next is an experience I still can't describe fully. But Austin Fischer has recently [given](#) me the perfect words for a quick summary: God

called my name.

John Wesley also has provided helpful language for my experience: “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

In an instant, everything changed. I stopped crying, said “thank you” to God, stood up and had the best evening walk of my life.

The road goes ever on and on ...

My journey back to faith didn't end there, however. I went on to attend [Southwest Baptist University](#) in Bolivar, Mo. One of my majors was Christian studies, and I took numerous courses in theology and Bible. It changed my life.

I also took New Testament History with Dr. Mike Fuhrman, Methods of Biblical Interpretation with Dr. Bing Bayer, Christian Doctrine with Dr. Don Denton, Philosophical Foundations with Dr. Zach Manis, World Religions with Dr. Kelly Malone, countless New Testament electives with Dr. Rodney Reeves, and many more classes.

God knew what he was doing by taking me to Southwest Baptist University. I still had my questions, and if God hadn't brought those professors into my life, I almost certainly would have “relapsed.” They provided solid answers to some of my questions, and they helped me re-frame my other questions so they no longer threatened the foundations of my faith in Christ.

My experience under those men led me to recognize and pursue a call to pastoral ministry and advanced theological education. One of my ministry goals is to serve others in the way my professors served me.

The power of stories

My personal story is not normative for everyone else. My de-conversion—not to mention my re-conversion—in many ways, is unlike that of Joshua Harris. But there are important overlaps.

I want my story to be a source of truth and hope. The most important truth I want to drive home is this: God can and does bring his children back home. What is impossible for humans is no sweat for God. The God of the Bible is not sitting idly up in heaven, flustered and unable to do anything about people like me.

No, God draws people to himself (John 6:44). He can take away a heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10). God can restore even the most recalcitrant of his children (Hosea 1-3). God does so in his own time and in his own ways, but there is no mystery that he can and does do it. I'm living proof.

What will happen to people like Joshua Harris? I don't know. But God does.

My favorite hymn is "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," and these lyrics never cease to grip me: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love / Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it / Seal it for thy courts above."

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