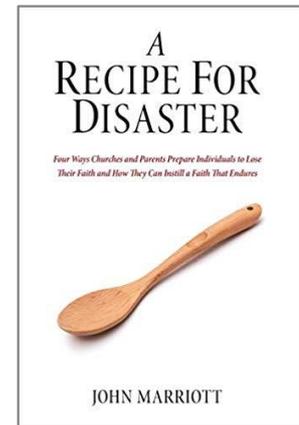


# John Marriott

## A Recipe for Disaster

Four Ways Churches and Parents Prepare Individuals to Lose Their Faith and How They Can Instill a Faith That Endures

Wipf & Stock 2018  
Notes by Alison Morgan April 2019



*'The statistics speak for themselves; record numbers of individuals who at one time identified as Christians are deconverting from the faith and identifying as unbelievers. Why is this happening and what can be done to prevent it? A Recipe for Disaster seeks to answer those questions by focusing on the four ways churches and parents unwittingly contribute to the deconversion process. By over-preparing, under-preparing, ill-preparing, and painfully preparing those they are responsible to disciple into mature believers, churches and parents instead set them up for a crisis of faith that all too often leads to the loss of faith. In response to each of the four methods of poor preparation, A Recipe for Disaster offers a recipe for success, four alternative methods of preparation designed to instill lifelong faith.'*

*John Marriott is the chair of the World Religions department at the Institute of Religious Studies at Missional University, and an adjunct professor in the Philosophy and Intercultural Studies departments at Biola University. He is also the director for Cultural Engagement at the Renaissance Forum and an editorial consultant for the Center for Christian Thought.*

This is an immensely helpful book, although its emphasis is on the deconversion of Christians from a fundamentalist or conservative evangelical background opens up questions about those who drift away from churches at the opposite, liberal end of the ecclesiastical spectrum. Perhaps this is because of the author's North American context, or perhaps it's simply because both conversion and deconversion tend to be more sharply delineated in such cases, and so are more easily investigated. But the decline in membership of liberal churches could perhaps have been helpfully explored in the sections dealing with the influence of the secular culture in which we now live.

Marriott's emphasis on the church's responsibility to ensure it provides careful formation and discipling of believers in order to protect them from the misconceptions and assumptions which may lead to a crisis of faith is important. And his warnings concerning the ever-changing, top-down nature of our secular culture are helpful. Should we be taking more active steps to ensure that as Christians we contribute to the shaping of culture, rather than oscillating as we so often do between conformity and resistance?

### Introduction

'When you ask former believers why they lost their faith, without exception they'll tell you it's because they could no longer believe that Christianity is true.' The reason why they can no longer believe it is different for every person, and there are no definitive 'causes'. But there are specific factors which set people up for a crisis of faith which can lead to deconversion. Marriott identifies four such factors, and illustrates each with individual life stories.

### 1. A Tale of Two Christians

Jonathan Edwards, Olympic triple jumper, conspicuous for his strong faith, who deconverted ten years later.

Ken Daniels, missionary to the Daza people of Niger.

Many people have deconversion stories; all offer reasons but they are rarely objective factors which would cause anyone else to deconvert. The figures leaving in the US include a high proportion of young people brought up in Christian homes. An increasing proportion of college aged people do not identify with a specific religion – a generation is on the way to being lost.

'A Recipe for Disaster' maintains that there is a general theory that sheds light on the loss of faith.' It identifies not a cause, but a combination of factors that together often lead to deconversion. The same five ingredients are found in the stories of both Edwards and Daniels, though they come from very different backgrounds:

1. Deconverts tend to have above average intelligence
2. Deconverts possess the personality trait of being open to new experiences (and are therefore likely to be unsatisfied with fundamentalist, conservative religions)
3. Deconverts have a low tolerance for fundamentalist and right-wing authoritarian attitudes

4. Deconverts show an inability to process and reconcile difficulties with their faith- typically, they get stuck at Fowler's stage 4
5. Deconverts show a high intolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty – those who like certainty fit better within a religious system

Why did Edwards and Daniels fail to get past the difficulties they encountered at the 4<sup>th</sup> stage of their faith development? Marriott suggests the clue lies in the way they were 'prepared'. The answer lies in their spiritual formation. In deconversion stories, the same objections appear repeatedly; but they all rest on certain presuppositions about God, the Bible and the Christian faith which, when unmet, produce a crisis of faith. These assumptions come from their evangelical training. If there are ingredients which presuppose deconversion, there is also an oven which binds them together – in this case, the secular culture in which we live. 'Believing in God is increasingly difficult because Christianity is no longer afforded the status as the official story underwriting our culture... The narrative shaping culture is.. a cocktail of modern Enlightenment rationalism and scientism.' Deconversion is best thought of as the produce of a recipe, with ingredients, preparation and an environment where prepared ingredients are baked. Understood this way, it should be possible to address the growing trend of deconversion in a constructive manner.

## 2. The Word on Deconversion

Dan Barker was brought up a Christian and spent 19 years in full time Christian work. He is now one of America's leading atheists. How do we make sense of this? The gospels say helpful things about deconversion, or 'apostasy'. Jesus expected to see people who had previously followed him ceasing to do so:

- Matt 24.4-13 on false prophets who would lead people astray
- Luke 8.4-15 on the parable of the sower, particularly those on rocky ground who receive the message with joy but then fall away
- Judas fell away – after three years ministering with Jesus

Charles Templeton preached to thousands all over the world over 50 years, co-founded Youth for Christ – and deconverted, saying there is no God, and the Church teaches things which are demonstrably not true.

The writers of the epistles offer many warnings and encouragements to persevere in faith – there are 6 warnings in Hebrews alone (eg 3.12-14; 6.4-6). Paul lamented the loss of faith of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim 1.19, 2 Tim 2.18), and warned that some would abandon the faith (1 Tim 4.1, 5.15). In 2 Thessalonians 2.13 he warns that some will 'fall away' (*apostasia*, used otherwise only in Acts 21.21). See also Peter – 2 Pet 2.15, false teachers who wander off, and their fate); John 2.18-19 on antichrists. It's clear that the NT does not assume that all followers of Jesus will remain such.

## 3. Hoping for the best. Preparing for the worst?

Greg converted to Christ in a fundamentalist Pentecostal church. The problem was, it expected him to have certainty about a vast number of Christian teachings; it was high on emotion but low on good theology. And if any one of these turned out to be false, the entire faith would collapse. One was the doctrine that the Bible is inerrant, and that it teaches that the Earth was created in 6 24-hour days about 10,000 years ago. Greg enrolled in a class on evolution at uni, and deconverted. The problem was not that he became convinced that evolution was true and that the Bible contained errors – it was that he had been taught that the entire Christian religion depended on those beliefs about creation being true. Coming from a non-Christian home, Greg was entirely dependent on the teaching he'd received through the church. Furthermore, when he expressed his crisis of faith, he was criticised and rejected.

There are four degrees of preparation:

1. **Over-prepared** – when the theological, doctrinal and lifestyle assumptions that the church requires a believer to hold about the nature of Christianity are inflexible and excessive. Believers are required to assent to a whole package, much of which consists of assumptions about what Christianity is and must be. The entire package stands or falls together. A sign that a believer is over-prepared is the number of doctrines they take to be matters essential to be authentically Christian.
2. **Under-prepared** – when the church fails to provide the kind of reflective and cognitive spiritual formation a believer needs to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Western Christians are, metaphorically speaking, culturally swimming upstream - just like a migrating salmon. It can be hard work. Greg's church focussed on spiritual experiences with the Holy Spirit and being separate from the world, rather than helping young believers to face the cultural challenges of the day. Believers are under-prepared when they are poorly socialised/disciplined by the church; and they being to see the faith as out-dated and irrelevant.
3. **Ill-prepared** – when churches provide an inadequate conceptual framework. The NT insists that salvation comes not by works but by believing in Jesus. Greg's church thought it understood what 'belief' meant, and defined it in

terms of mental assent to propositions about Jesus; faith is seen as a psychological state wherein one is certain about certain beliefs (in this case including young earth creationism). In fact it's much more about trusting than about believing in this sense. Faith is a commitment of trust, not a psychological state of certainty.

4. **Painfully prepared** – when emotional hurts received from other believers act as a catalyst for the examination of nagging doubts. Moral failures, hypocrisy, spiritually abusive leadership, being let down or feeling unsupported in a time of need, a lack of forgiveness, judgmentalism, and self-righteousness create wounds which cause people to wonder if Christianity is true – if so, how can Christians behave like this? In John 13, Jesus gave a new commandment to love one another, and John 17 he prayed that his followers will be one; and yet many former Christians have been shamefully treated by those who identified as followers of Jesus. Love is the ultimate apologetic; if Jesus is who he says he is then the difference he makes in our lives should be easily recognisable. Time and time again, former Christians identify the less than loving ways they were treated by other believers as the catalyst for their doubts that eventually culminated in their loss of faith. We are hard-wired to need community, and its failure can be devastating.

## 4. Over-prepared

How the families/churches communicate to believers what Christianity is can make the difference between standing and falling in a time of crisis. Rachel was encouraged to ask questions, Dave was taught to live by rules and regulations, to conform to a strict package of beliefs. Her faith survived; his did not.

Over-prepared believers suffer from a theological condition Marriott calls the *Tyranny of the Necessary*. They are required to accept an excessive number of theological beliefs to maintain their identity as a genuine biblical Christian. This sets them up for a crisis of faith. In fact these beliefs are essential only to the take or interpretation of Christianity that the family or church community has mistaken for Christianity itself. It is a mistake to see the Bible as a source of inerrant knowledge or as a collection of laws to be obeyed, rather than as the story of God's redemption of humanity.

The faith of over-prepared believers often collapses over the realisation that any one of a myriad of 'truths' they have been taught is not, in fact, true. This produces huge cognitive tension, and ultimately often renunciation of the struggle. We must be aware of the negative impact of burdening believers with doctrines and theological positions that are not essential for being a genuine biblical Christian.

## 5. Under-prepared

The stories of many people who have deconverted show that they simply were not prepared for the task of living out an ancient faith in a modern world. Their religious socialization failed to help them bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and their lived experience in the 21st century. The narrative that governs the church and the narrative that governs the culture are very different.

Craig was brought up aware of the complexity of scripture. He was encouraged to appreciate the complexity and difficulty of believing the Bible in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. His faith survived. Alan was brought up in context where the Bible was understood in a very literal way. His church was not aware of its different genres, and read it neither as literature nor as history. Alan abandoned his faith. People like Alan suffer from *Spiritual Culture-Shock*; they come from Christian communities that do not appreciate the challenge of being a 21<sup>st</sup> century believer.

Many churches still provide a Sunday School flannelgraph conception of Christianity. It is totally inadequate in the context of a secular society. Culture, Vanhoozer suggests, is like the software which runs in the background, operating the hardware of a computer, providing the information needed for it to run. It is a comprehensive, shared set of largely subconscious assumptions and values of a group that are the produce of both history and institutions, and which constitutes for them a social "reality". And it is in constant shift. Culture is a top down production, it's changing, and it's secular. Those who continue to adhere to the 'world' as defined by the religious traditions find themselves in the position of cognitive minorities. Practical atheism is the de facto religion of contemporary secular society and culture. Christian allegiance is in free fall in the US among young people, who see Christianity as judgemental, hypocritical, old fashioned and boring.

The Bible makes some difficult claims; it offers an enchanted world, and we live in a disenchanted one. We look to science to explain reality, not to God. The Bible just offers fantastical stories. We need to help people deal with this apparent discrepancy, cross the cultural divide. If the church does not respond to the formative power of culture and the strangeness of the Bible, it makes belief difficult.

## 6 & 7. Ill-prepared

Inadequate conceptions about God and the nature of the Bible are recurring themes in the stories of former believers – conceptions which give them expectations about what God would do for them and how the bible should look. The faith crisis occurs when the expectations are unmet.

Ill-prepared believers suffer from a philosophical condition which Marriott refers to as *Half-Baked*. They have not been given balanced or accurate theological concepts about God and/or the Bible. Many deconverts trace their loss of faith to problems they had with the Bible, in particular that they had been taught it was inerrant, and are floored by the discovery of error and contradiction within it. Another common mistake is to assume that Bible is true in a literal, scientific sense – and so a simple geology or evolution class explodes your faith.

Other trace their deconversions to problems with God – whom they understand to be loving and merciful, but not holy and just. The OT may therefore come as a terrible shock. Noah and the ark is a lovely story – but what about everyone who drowned? Jericho, and everyone who died? And what about your own life – what when God isn't there for you? American teenagers believe God is nice and wants us to be nice; that the goal of life is to be happy; and that God will intervene when things go wrong. When these expectations are not met, people deconvert. The failure of prayer is a significant reason given by deconverts for their loss of faith. And yet the psalms are full of this kind of agony – especially psalm 88. The underlying assumption is that God must be fair, and that he owes us something for our devotion – this is called the reciprocity principle. When he doesn't, we feel betrayed. We all desire justice.

We should offer an accurate presentation of the Bible – a book written over centuries by many people, which is scientifically inaccurate and contains violence and morally challenging practices. Likewise we should make clear that God does not promise to answer all prayers, intervene in all circumstances, act in accordance with our ideas of fairness – he may be silent, inactive and apparently unjust: but he is always loving, kind and good.

## 8. Painfully prepared

James was a youth leader, who confessed he had solicited a prostitute. He was removed from leadership and led through a firm but gentle process of discipline/restoration; he has returned to ministry, and remains a Christian. Devyn came from a broken home, entered into an abusive marriage, turned to porn to support her daughter. She had become a Christian, but when she sought help from the church, the leadership condemned and rejected her, publicised her shame and told people to have no further contact with her. James was treated as a family member in need of help. Devyn was treated as an enemy to be fought against. She is no longer a believer.

Many former believers say that what set them off on their deconversion journey is how they were treated by their church leadership or other Christians. Feeling let down, wounded, mistreated, and abused caused former believers to re-evaluate what they believed. Marriott terms this stumbling block to faith *Friendly Fire*. 'Over and over again, those who have lost their faith tell stories of being hit by Friendly Fire in the form of judgment and condemnation from fellow believers. Harsh words spoken from self-righteous lips, by those who identify as Christians, can leave deep wounds.'

'There are many cases where church leadership is culpable. Failing to not only live up to what they preach but actually living in opposition to it proves to be intolerable for former believers. So, too, the heavy-handed tactics such as public shaming disguised as discipline and abusive control in the name of holiness are unquestionably failures on the part of the leadership.'

Many former believers have been hurt by the careless words and actions of fellow believers. Self-righteousness is a sin that Christians seem especially prone to. The classic example is the Pharisees, for whom Jesus reserved his most scorching words of judgment. In Matt 23 Jesus judges the Pharisees and the teachers of the law for appearing righteous on the outside but being inwardly wicked.

Karen Ross has demonstrated that when an individual is hurt by a fellow believer it often has the effect of allowing them to consider latent doubts and questions. Being wounded by the church resulted in former believers having not only a beef with the Christians that wounded them, but also God, whom they could not distance from the behavior of his people.

## 9 & 10. A Recipe for Success

'Despite the best of intentions, the church can inadvertently prepare believers for a crisis of faith that may lead to deconversion. The combination of a specific constellation of personality traits, inadequate socialization into the Christian faith and our increasingly secular culture constitute the ingredients, preparation, and cooking environment of the *Recipe for Disaster*.'

There is another way.

**Over-preparation** – requiring believers to hold an excessive number of theological beliefs regarded as necessary to be a biblical Christian, creating a fragile faith which is ripe for a crisis – should be replaced with helping them to develop a stable, flexible faith that enables them to flourish. Jesus did not advocate a burdensome religion; we can be content with the sufficient, insisting only on the essential beliefs and attitudes that one must possess to be a follower of Jesus. We should explain these things, and then focus on helping them become more like Christ through sitting at his feet, rather than burdening them with non-essentials. What then are the essentials?

1. The salvation message – an understanding of the work of Christ on the cross and his subsequent resurrection as the means by which we are reconciled to God
2. The ecumenical creeds of the church – which summarise the essentials of our faith

**Under-preparation** – leaving people vulnerable to spiritual culture-shock by failing to help them bridge the gap between the Bible and our own contemporary culture.

- We should help people realise that every culture depends on a set of invisible assumptions, and that the Bible can be understood only by examining both those which characterised the culture at the time and those which govern our own.
- We should emphasize the importance of the church in spiritual formation; through worship, prayer and teaching we are cognitively and personally reformed. And we should actively engage in formation that counteracts the formation of the world, attending to head, heart and gut. We tend to aim only at the head, through preaching; but habits and practices are required too – we need the spiritual disciplines.
- Finally, we should teach the Bible by receiving it as story and seeking to discover the role it calls us to play; which can be done only by paying careful attention to both the original (historical and cultural) and the present contexts.

**Poor preparation** – instilling inadequate expectations of God and the Bible, opening the way to a crisis of faith when those expectations are not met. If we wish to teach that the Bible is inerrant, we must explain what we mean. But it might be better to avoid the term altogether, and teach that the Bible is trustworthy and reliable in everything that God requires us to believe in terms of life and godliness; human error does not invalidate the Christian faith itself. And as far as God himself is concerned, we should provide biblical teaching on the character of God, leading people away from a comfort-blanket God towards one who is holy and just as well as loving and good, who warns us to expect suffering and does not promise to give us everything we want. If Jesus and the disciples suffered, why should we expect otherwise?

**Painful preparation** – when believers are wounded by ‘friendly fire’ from church leaders or members. Authoritative communities have real power in people’s lives, and the damage can be immense. We should not avoid discipline, but there is a difference between friendly fire and what the Bible calls the wounds of a friend. The wounds of a friend are motivated by grace, not judgment, and have our welfare in mind. We must ensure our leadership is grace-based, and that its aim even in correction is to help people conform to Christ; it must be marked by humility and recognition of our own shortcomings. Within the church we should strive to avoid legalism, which focusses on keeping rules and regulations as a means to finding favour with God, and sees the rules as ends in themselves. John explains that Christ is full of grace and truth (1.14); he is not a legalist. Grace is absolutely central to the Christian faith. If God deals with us in love, not counting our sins against us (Rom 4.7-8), that is how we should deal with fellow believers. We are members of a family, and that should govern how we deal with one another. Gal 5.6: ‘the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.’

## 11. Conclusion

Of the three elements of the deconversion recipe, the preparation element is the one for us to focus on. We can’t do much about personality, or about the culture we live in. But ‘how the church goes about preparing believers can result in a recipe for disaster or a recipe for success.’

**Appendix** – the role of the internet. There is a whole atheist advocacy out there, as never before. We must do our best to ensure we are ready with answers and resources that make the best case possible for the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.