



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 9 • Number 3 • Summer 2000

A REVIEW ARTICLE
LESSONS FROM AN APOSTATE

Richard J. Vincent

***JESUS DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE: FROM
FUNDAMENTALIST TO FREEDOM WRITER***

Skipp Porteous

Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books (1991)

313 pages, cloth, \$27.95.

Whether it's the message of Christ or defending the Bill of Rights, Skipp Porteous is ever the evangelist. After many years of service as a Pentecostal minister, Skipp became disillusioned with religion and abandoned his profession. He then took up the cause of defending the Constitution from the threat of extreme right-wing zealots. These zealots predominantly arise from fundamentalist Christianity. The story of Porteous' rise and fall in the faith and subsequent move into defending First Amendment rights is recounted in *Jesus Doesn't Live Here Anymore*.

SKIPP'S STORY

Skipp Porteous grew up in a home where "religion, although mostly in the background, seemed a natural part of [his] life" (28). His grandparents were devout believers. Skipp writes, "From early on I was influenced by their religious zeal, which was strict but never approached fanaticism" (28). His parents also had a high respect for religion. Prayer, church attendance, respect for the Bible, and "sword drills" were a routine part of his life (28-31).

As an adolescent, Skipp attended a Baptist church. Through this affiliation, he ended up spending two summers at evangelist Jack Wyrzten's Word of Life Ranch. The first summer he was crowned the Word of Life Boxing Champ. The second summer he became, in his words, "a certified fanatic" (42-43). He said, "The Baptist Church and Word of Life ranch turned me into a disciple of Jesus, a die-hard Christian fundamentalist" (42).

Skipp readily accepted teachings on "personal separation" by living according to the standard fundamentalist list of "do's and don'ts" (primarily don'ts—don't drink, smoke, dance, gamble, go to movies, listen to rock music, etc.). He was taught that this was the way believers "showed their unwavering dedication to the Lord" (42). Skipp also desired to preach the Gospel from a street corner in his hometown, but his mother forbade it (43).

Then, as with many young converts, his zeal dissipated. Skipp writes, "I tired of Christianity; all of my interest in the Bible disappeared. Soon, I passed my religious experience off as mere childhood foolishness" (45).

Leaving home to attend the Pan America Art School in New York he got a taste of city life with all its various experiences. After finishing school, he took a job as an assistant at Villagio Italia, a resort in the Catskills. Here he met his first wife, Linda Silvernail, a fifteen-year-old high school girl at the time. Later that year Skipp turned 21. The Vietnam War was escalating, and he was drafted for military service. Skipp had no desire to take part in a war which he did not condone. Fortunately, President Kennedy had issued an order exempting married men from the draft. Skipp was able to exempt himself from military service by marrying Linda, who had just turned sixteen.

After their marriage, Skipp and Linda moved to Harbor City, California. Upon arriving, Skipp secretly wished he had not married because of the wealth of eligible and flirta-

tious women in California. Five months after their wedding, Skipp began an affair with a woman named Ann. Because of his belief in life-long marriage, he did not want to divorce Linda; however, he did not want to end his affair either. Skipp writes, "Before long I felt the emotional pressure of living a dual life" (76). This cognitive dissonance and the guilt it produced was to be his stepping-stone back to religion. "Quite reasonably, guilt overtook me as my affair with Ann continued, and I knew I needed some sort of guidance" (76).

Skipp had recently befriended a joyous hymn-singing believer named Dave. He harbored a hope that Dave's religion might be what he needed to help him with his problems. Finding out that Dave attended The People's Tabernacle of Faith in Los Angeles, Skipp decided to attend his friend's church to see if a remedy to his beleaguered conscience could be found.

The animated music and uproarious excitement of the worship at the church fascinated Skipp, who had grown up with doleful, dragging hymns. After the service, as he and his wife were attempting to leave, a "large white woman" threw her arms around Skipp in a bear hug. Other enthusiastic parishioners greeted and hugged both Linda and Skipp. Everyone invited them back to the evening service. "Although not quite at home, I didn't feel like a stranger; the people accepted me like I was a member of the family" (79). This reception was a marked contrast to Skipp's previous attempt a few years earlier to rediscover religion. He had attended a Methodist church in Manhattan and was totally ignored by those around him.

This warm welcome hooked Skipp and prompted a new reformation in his life. He and Linda began to attend the church regularly. He also broke off his affair with Ann. Ann was hurt by the sudden rejection. When she asked why, Skipp told her that he had "found the Lord again"

(80). Stunned in disbelief by this radical turn of events, Ann responded with accusations of insanity.

"Determined to begin life anew, I immersed myself in Christianity" (80). Skipp began to listen regularly to Christian radio. The words of faith healer Kathryn Kuhlman, Garner Ted Armstrong, J. Vernon McGee, and Demos Shakarian, founder of the Full Gospel Businessman's Fellowship International, became his regular diet. Later, he was introduced to prosperity gospel teachers such as Fred Price and Kenneth Hagin (107).

Skipp and Linda also befriended a young couple, Ric and Renee. Ric was full of stories about evangelists and faith healers. He schooled Skipp and Linda with tales of Oral Roberts and prayer cloths. He also introduced them to Pentecostal distinctives such as being "slain in the Spirit," baptism in the Spirit, and tongues. But it was Ric's distinctively fundamentalist teaching concerning the secret rapture of the Church that was the final stone in Skipp's desire to become a minister. He writes,

Learning about the Rapture was a milestone for me; it was awesome to think that millions of people were totally unprepared for such an event. I felt privileged to have knowledge of this, and realized that, for some reason, the Lord had held this knowledge back until now; perhaps, because at any other time in my life I would have laughed at it. Now, though, I could handle it responsibly and use it to win souls for Jesus. At that moment, I made a secret decision to become a minister and serve the Lord full time (84).

This decision began a long course of ministry, both within and without the institution of the Church. Skipp and Linda began to witness door-to-door in Long Beach (85). Under the ministry of evangelist Joe Jordan, Skipp finally received the baptism of the Spirit and evidenced it

by speaking in tongues (88-89). He also began to attend a Bible college in the evening with his friend Ric (90).

More than anything, however, his "greatest passion was to win souls" (95). He learned a method of evangelism from Pastor Jack Hayford that consisted of just four verses from the Bible (95-97). He began to approach people on Hollywood's famous Sunset Strip and initiate conversation by asking, "If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?" (101-102). This soon led to the establishment of a church on the strip headed by Skipp and Ric. Full-time school, work, and ministry led to discord in Skipp's household which he naturally chalked up as the work of Satan seeking to hinder his ministry (104).

The Glad Tidings Tabernacle was his next place of ministry. Skipp and Linda became Sunday school teachers and headed the youth and outreach ministry (108). Ric and Renee soon followed them to the Tabernacle. Skipp and Ric were so effective in their ministries at the Tabernacle that they were officially recognized as Gospel ministers through ordination (109).

The two couples soon became disillusioned with the weak preaching of the senior pastor of the Tabernacle, Pastor Young. They informed Young of their grievances and his preaching changed, but not for the better. Apparently threatened by Skipp and Ric's complaints "he went on prophetic binges, warning of God's impending judgment on those who resist the Spirit. He told of people falling out of trees, off ladders, or down the stairs, and of others run over by automobiles, all because they rebelled against the will of God" (120). This prompted Skipp to leave the church.

Skipp took a job in the customer service division of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power while continuing to hold Bible studies in his home. Eventually a new church formed in his house. Later, someone offered them

the use of a small building and he named the new church Eagle Rock Assembly. An influential couple introduced them to conspiracy theories and demonology. Soon "long, arduous, and often violent" exorcisms were taking place at the church (135). "Over a period of almost three years, we performed dozens of exorcisms. Our victims included men, women, and children—as young as seven and eight" (137). This new interest soon waned. "After a while, it became clear that everyone we thought we delivered of demons reverted back to their old ways and still had the same problems. In fact, several ended up in mental institutions or died through suicide. Rather than admit to the severity of our destruction, we just let it go and went on to emphasize something else" (137).

A relief from this craziness was offered in the person of Rev. Fred Musson. Musson offered Skipp a job in New York at West Copake (Dutch) Reformed Church as a youth minister. With his marriage on the rocks, Skipp viewed this as a welcome and sane relief. On his drive from California to New York Skipp reflected on the last nine years. In retrospect, Skipp writes, "In the beginning, everything seemed so innocent and simple. Then, because of my own actions [presumably referring to his affair with Ann which caused him to seek solace in religion], fear and guilt drove me into an abyss, a bottomless pit from which I almost didn't escape. Before I knew it, I had taken my family with me" (147).

After a time in New York, Skipp was asked to leave West Copake because he was not ordained in the Reformed Church. He immediately began a new ministry, the Agape House, in Hillsdale. And, like before, it was successful. He even considered running for a seat on the local school board. He viewed this as a way to get Christianity back in the schools and to help censure books that were not decent. Support for his candidacy was strong. However, a

brief bout of resistance caused him to withdraw from this possibility (154-55).

One day a young family needed financial assistance. Skipp allowed them to room in the Agape house. When one of the board members discovered that they were Jews, he castigated Skipp for allowing an unsaved family to live in the church building without the board's approval. This struck Skipp as callous and insensitive, and though the situation cleared, he viewed it as a great turning point in his ministry (155).

Meanwhile, in Skipp's home, all things were not well. After twelve years of marriage, he wanted to call it quits. Feeling oppressed in the marriage, he finally asked for a divorce. Linda left, but was back in a month. A few months later, she left again, this time for good (156).

Word of the separation spread quickly. Skipp lost his radio ministry due to lack of funds. Outside speaking engagements were cancelled. Declared unfit for ministry, Skipp was asked to step down as pastor. Skipp moved back home to live with his parents and took a job at a newspaper. Initially expecting only to take a year's leave from ministry, this move led to his abandoning the faith altogether.

Skipp's work schedule did not allow him to attend church. Shunned by his Christian friends, new friends opened his eyes to many new things. Skipp writes, "For the first time in many years I allowed myself to take an honest look at the faith I blindly embraced for so long" (158). He decided that in light of copyist's errors in the ancient manuscripts of the Bible "we cannot possibly know what the originals said" (158).

He filed for divorce. Linda did not contest it. He hastily became acquainted with another recently divorced woman and they quickly married. Seven weeks later, due to his new wife's strange behavior and beliefs, he left her.

Skipp then began to help the local policemen in under-

cover jobs and on one of the jobs met his present wife, Barbara. Barbara's leftist leanings and Skipp's background and experience soon combined to produce an organization devoted to First Amendment issues.

President Reagan and his sympathies with the Religious Right caused Skipp and Barbara to fear the unchallenged rise of a new Religious Right. They attempted to publish a book, but soon decided to publish a newsletter "to promote the separation of church and state" (185). Over time this became *The Freedom Writer*. This newsletter is now a part of Skipp's educational organization, The Institute for First Amendment Studies. Skipp's background and experience have allowed him to debate those on the Religious Right. He has appeared on numerous news shows, radio, and TV, and is now considered a prominent expert in this area.

Skipp's evangelistic zeal has not waned. Instead, it has been channeled into a new message—the message of free speech and freedom of (and if one chooses, from) religion. Though no longer declaring the good news of Jesus Christ, Skipp is zealously declaring his new message of freedom, tolerance, and equality. Indeed, one could say that he has exchanged one crusade for another.

THE TURNING POINT

What factors led to Skipp's rejection of the Christian faith? He outlines this in the pivotal chapter from which the book gets its title, *Jesus Doesn't Live Here Anymore*.

Skipp realized that he had been self-deceived and that a major source of this deception centered around the Pentecostal/charismatic belief system he embraced. He came to realize that many of the supposed signs, wonders, and miracles he had experienced and participated in "could easily be explained" apart from supernatural agency (176). For example, he realized that his tongues-speaking had been

self-generated. Upon further investigation he determined he was speaking merely gibberish and not a true language.

"Every healing I witnessed over the years was either intentionally fraudulent, or had perfectly rational explanations" (177). Skipp questions why faith healers do not heal victims of aids—the modern-day equivalent of leprosy. He takes the claims of the faith healers to their logical conclusion and asks, "Why [don't] they just drop by their nearest hospital and clean it out?" (178)

"My final step in deliverance from oppressive religion came when I looked objectively at the Bible" (178). Skipp mentions that there "are many good books available on the subject for those who are willing to read them with an open mind" (178). According to Skipp, since none of the words of Jesus were actually written by Jesus and since the writers of the Gospels wrote years after Christ's life, the gospel accounts of Jesus must not be trusted as accurate and reliable sources for Jesus' life and ministry. He states that "[t]he Gospel writers don't even agree on Jesus's genealogy, or exactly what he said, or the details of his life, leaving us with a record replete with inconsistencies and contradictions" (178). He uncritically rests on the conclusions of the members of The Jesus Seminar—a controversial liberal think-tank. The rest of the New Testament he discounts by connecting it to Paul who "was a sexist, racist (he endorsed slavery), bigoted zealot" who happened to succeed in "creating a major religion out of the life of an obscure Jew" (179). He attributes the fragmentation of Christianity into various denominations and sects to Paul's letters.

The self-deception, false miracles, and new outlook on the Bible lead him to this conclusion:

I came to realize that a simple three-letter word perpetuates the entire born-again industry: "sin." No one is perfect.

Everyone occasionally makes poor choices, and sometimes acts maliciously, but no one "sins." "Sin" is nothing more than a theological concept which has no basis in reality. Sin sells religion. No one is going to be punished by God for sins. I firmly believe that, and when I finally accepted the truth, it set me free. (179)

Apostasy is defined as "falling away from the faith." Apostasy is not struggling with one's own shortcomings or failures, nor is it failing to live up to all one's aspirations. Nor is it doubting truth or backsliding away from the faith for a short time. Apostasy involves a direct rejection of beliefs that one previously held dear. In Christian theology, it is a deliberate repudiation of the gospel of Christ Jesus. Skipp Porteous does not leave us in the dark concerning his rejection of the faith he once held dear. He plainly reveals his heart when he writes,

At the age of eleven, I invited Jesus to live in my heart. Full of faith, I said, "Jesus, I invite you to live in my heart." And, in my mind, he lived in my heart for many years. Now, without a shred of guilt or fear, I can say, "Jesus doesn't live here anymore" (179).

Though he may be averse to the term, Skipp is a self-proclaimed apostate. In the book he shuns atheism and embraces agnosticism.

Skipp has no place for God in religion. He does favor a "humanistic type of Christianity" (178). Later in the book, in a transcript of a radio interview, he says,

What we have in the Bible is replete with errors, hearsay, stories that were told from one generation to another. You know, it's not accurate. If you want to build a humanistic religion on it, fine. "Love thy neighbor" and all that, but to

take it word-for-word, literally, you just miss the whole point (243).

Skipp has no quarrels with a godless religion. "Love thy neighbor" is fine, but "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind" is unacceptable. Indeed, in his opinion, this kind of devotion may well lead to fanaticism.

Skipp's new message involves defending the rights of American citizens in accord with the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights. Skipp fears the greatest threat to First Amendment freedoms may come from fundamentalist Christians who desire to make the Bible the law of the land and set it above the founding documents of America.

WHY SKIPP IS RIGHT ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Of course, on the surface it sounds pious to state that God's Law is the supreme law of the land. The problem is that it flies in the face of the intent of the founding fathers. In spite of Christian historical revisionism, America is the product of the Enlightenment (not particularly friendly to religion), and the Whig Party, just as much (if not more!) as it is the product of Christianity. The freedom of religion is built into our democracy. The American government is to be neutral toward religion ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . ."), and it is to allow religious liberty for all (" . . . or prohibiting the free exercise thereof").

Christians must quit equating evangelism with increased political exposure, influence and might. We must honor the founding documents of our nation. The First Amendment is not in opposition to religious freedom. We are not called to "take back our nation for Christ." We are called to live as aliens and strangers, citizens of a heavenly

kingdom, salt and light in a corrupt world.

The people in our churches hardly know the Gospel. The doctrine of the Trinity is practically unknown or tossed aside as irrelevant to practical living. The incarnation of Jesus Christ and its importance in redemptive history is seldom taught. If a study of the early Church were done in many of our churches and its Christological heresies were presented, we would find that many Christians are heretics in their understanding of the person of Christ. We have a poor understanding of the Holy Spirit and his work (the charismatic excess is a prime example of this fault in our theology). Predestination, regeneration, and justification (to name just a few) are foreign words to many. Atonement means little and is deemed irrelevant at best, primitive at worst. And in spite of these deficiencies, we expend huge efforts trying to Christianize politics.

American Christians are frustrated that they have been marginalized, that their voice is not the predominant one anymore, and they just won't have it! They demand to be in the majority. To think that Christianity could survive among just a small scattered remnant of believers relegated to the periphery of society is unthinkable to many modern Christians. And yet this is what defined Christianity in its early centuries.

Almost every unbeliever I read who attacks Christianity is not necessarily opposed to the positive character qualities it promotes. Rather, they are unsettled by the power-hungry faction of the Church which desires to stifle other's clearly-stated rights as established in the founding documents of our nation. They are legitimately concerned about what would happen to our republic should right-wing Christianity gain prominence in the political arena.

Overzealous Christians *are* a threat to the current social structure. Skipp warns that in the future "our fight will be on many fronts, against many groups of highly organized,

and dangerous religious zealots. . . . The battle of the century looms ahead" (25). It is sad to think that the threat Skipp perceives from Christians is a political threat. It is sad to think that Christians are known, more than anything, for their political zealotry and not for their zeal to do good deeds to meet pressing needs, their zealousness to love, to be kind, to encourage, to serve! Skipp is afraid of everything that is bad about contemporary Christianity. It is time the Church cleaned house and got back to the central task of proclaiming the Triune God and his grace to wayward sinners. It is time we proclaimed a kingdom which transcends national boundaries rather than a secular kingdom of political maneuvering and force.

Theocracies are oppressive and undesirable in our day. Iran, Iraq, and the conflict in Ireland are proof of this. In Saudi Arabia people are executed for religious reasons—for apostatizing from their faith, for using drugs, for fornicating and committing adultery. In Ireland, Protestants and Catholics fight each other, not over religious doctrine, but as two political poles in conflict. Do we really want our religion and government to be indistinguishable? Do we realize what we are asking for?

I wish Skipp had nothing to complain about, but he legitimately does. I wish his only complaint was that Christians were mindless, dull, boorish, or naïve. Instead, he truly has a justifiable grievance. It is sad that after years in Christian ministry, Skipp saw nothing that convinced him of the reality of Christ and his grace. What he did see scared him enough to follow his apostasy with political action. Christians could self-righteously say that Skipp has a problem. I say that the Church does!

LEARNING FROM AN APOSTATE

What can we learn from a former fundamentalist gone astray? Although strict anticharismatic fundamentalists

may conclude that Skipp's waywardness from the faith has a lot to do with his charismatic interests, this is to discount the type of fundamentalism which formed him as a youth and to forget that much of Pentecostalism has great similarities to separatistic fundamentalism.

Although we must not completely blame Pentecostal/charismatic excess, we must not overlook it either. It appears as if Skipp ultimately grew disillusioned with all the charismatic extremes he was once attracted to. He went from one thrill to another—from spirit-baptism to tongues to signs and wonders to exorcisms—all ultimately leaving him empty enough to seek the next new experience and sensation to come along. It does not appear that doctrinal precision, careful exegesis of the Holy Scriptures, or theological accuracy were at the top of his list of priorities. These things must be at the forefront of true biblical ministry. Skipp's lack of theological acumen left him very susceptible to the next new craze. The same could be said of many fundamentalists who spend little time in theological pursuit and much time in anecdotes, scare tactics, conspiracy theories, right-wing politics, etc. In short, we could say that the dangers of anti-intellectualism and its handmaiden, experientialism, led to his downfall. Although we could lay much of the blame on his charismatic interests, fundamentalists surely have their own brand of anti-intellectualism and experientialism, with a host of anecdotes and clichés to prove it.

Skipp is also a good example of the fact that a minister of the Gospel should not be "a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6). Skipp was given little time to mature as a disciple before he was thrust into door-to-door evangelism, preaching, youth ministry, and other duties usually reserved for mature believers. Although Skipp never once mentions a bad motive on his part in all of his min-

istry (except perhaps feeling too guilty), could it be that the untold part of Skipp's story involves self-importance, pride, and conceit? I am not implying that this is necessarily the case, but this is a clear possibility.

Ultimately, however, the reason for his falling away began with a diminishing respect for the Word. "The respect I had for the Bible caused me to trust it blindly, which, I learned later, was dangerous" (31). We have already noted his comments concerning the Bible. It is interesting that these thoughts did not arise until after he had left the ministry. Could it be true of Skipp, as it is of many, that he decided what he was going to do, and *then* decided what he was going to believe?

The integrity and reliability of the Bible has been ably defended by many scholars (e.g., *The New Testament Documents* by F. F. Bruce). The findings of the Jesus Seminar scholars have come under severe scrutiny and have been shown to lack objectivity. The harmony of Jesus' and Paul's teaching has been demonstrated again and again in books such as *The Origin of Paul's Religion* by J. Gresham Machen and, more recently, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* by David Wenham. Obviously, Skipp's reasons for leaving the Christian faith have more to do with his desires than with an objective analysis of the issues. In other words, the issues are not as clearly settled as Skipp purports them to be.

For the believer, the Word of God is precious, life-giving truth. It is God's self-revelation to wayward sinners. It is a sure word in a confused world.

Obviously God's Word can be abused, taken out of context, distorted, perverted, and twisted. Fundamentalists and charismatics are chief culprits of this (and the tragic thing is that many are unwilling to admit it). Skipp is right: Many believers have completely missed the main point. But Skipp has missed the point as well. A humanistic reli-

gion that centers around man rather than the living God is empty of significance and not worthy of even being called a religion.

CONCLUSION

Skipp Porteous is still an evangelist. His zeal and proselytizing continue. Only his message has changed.

Learn a lesson from a self-avowed apostate. The roller-coaster ride of religion he rode for many years left him frustrated and empty. He moved from one experience to another, in search of greater thrills. At the end of the ride, when his world collapsed around him, he had nothing secure to fall back on. Lacking confidence in his old message of faith in Christ, he seized a new message of political freedom. Now Skipp's greatest fear is Christian zealots exerting pressure in the politic arena. Sadly, his fears are not without warrant.

Author

Richard J. Vincent is associate pastor of College Park Baptist Church, Indianapolis, Indiana. He is married and has one child. This is his first article in *Reformation & Revival Journal*.