

Losing Faith

by Anonymous

After leaving Caltech, I looked for a church where I could be active in some way. I ended up in a church where I became involved in the high school ministry (driving a van to pick up kids from all over the Seattle area for the weekly meetings, attending, and on rare occasions, leading the weekly meetings, helping at retreats, going into high schools to help kids get on-campus bible studies going), the college ministry (hosting and door-knocking for a dorm bible study, attending weekly campus-wide meetings and retreats), and the ministry to the cerebral palsy center (driving the CP van, feeding and helping dress folks at retreats and other events). Fortunately, getting a teaching certificate does not require nearly as much concentration as graduating from Caltech did. When I started working I cut back on many of these activities simply because of time. (Relevant here is that I traveled by Metro bus, having no car of my own.) I mention this not to prove that I was serious, just to make the point that I still had an active faith.

The story of how I lost my faith is not about events so much as thoughts. I have always believed that truth will bear up under scrutiny, so, believing Christianity to be true, I have always been willing to question it. When I was unable to arrive at satisfactory answers, I didn't reject Christianity, but simply put the questions on hold until I was older and perhaps wiser or more knowledgeable.

The central question, though, that really began to gnaw at me was: What is good about faith? That may seem like an odd question to a long-time committed Christian, but it bothers me. If faith is belief without evidence, then I think it is foolish at best, but often evil. Jim Jones followers had that kind of faith. So did the Branch Davidians in Waco. So do Islamic suicide bombers.

One answer to this is the extreme Calvinist answer that those who have true faith in Christ have it because they are the elect, given their faith by the grace of God. Any other faith is false, and evidence is irrelevant. If that's true, I apparently was elected, then impeached.

Anonymous is an honest, scientifically-trained man with extensive Evangelical experience who is seriously wondering what to believe.

Our pastor's response, on the other hand, is that faith is belief without compelling evidence. He believes that we do have the freedom to accept or reject God's offer of grace, and that God has provided enough evidence to convince an open mind, but not compel a closed one. I held to this school of thought too, but now find the evidence in favor of Christianity too weak, though I think my mind was more than open.

Let me be specific about some of my questions. If there is to be evidence for Christianity, then it should come from scripture, nature, history, personal experience, and the experience of fellow Christians. I have many more problems with scripture than I can list here, but I'll mention a few:

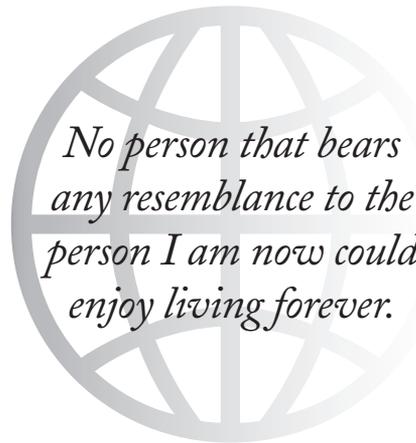
In the OT, satan appears only three times: in the parable of Job (in which he chats with God and takes orders from Him), in a vision of heaven in Zechariah (in which he acts as heavenly accuser, but shuts up when told to by God), and in 1 Chronicles 21:1 (in which he acts out the "anger of God" 2 Samuel 24:1). Yet in the NT, without any intervening teaching, everyone (Pharisees, Jesus, crowd, etc.) regards Satan as an anti-god and ruler of demons and evil spirits. Perhaps such a shift took place, but how did everyone know?

In the OT, "demon" is used only to describe the false, dead idols of the pagans. But in the NT, demons are real—forces of evil acting against God.

In the OT, evil spirits and deceiving spirits hang out in heaven and take orders from God (1 Samuel 16:14, 18:10; 1 Kings 22:20-23; 2 Chronicles 18:19-22). In the NT, they are against God along with the demons and Satan. Again, everyone seems to know this even though it is not taught anywhere in there scripture. Their beliefs about Satan and evil spirits are, however, consistent with the beliefs of the Zoroastrians with whom they spent their captivity in Babylon.

In the OT, God lives in heaven; dead people are just dead (or go down to

sheol, a nondescript place where no one praises God). Nowhere in the OT are the faithful promised an afterlife in heaven or the unfaithful a hell. But in the NT, Jesus doesn't have to introduce the Idea of heaven and hell because everyone but the Sadducees already believes in them. It seems to me that this is a response to the central problem of the OT: God promises that the faithful will prosper in this life and that the wicked will be punished (e.g., Deut 6, 7, 27, 28), yet the people and the prophets both observe that this is plainly not so. When will there be justice? Later.



In my youth I scoured the OT for references to God's concern for the poor and oppressed and there are many of them. But the OT is also loaded with awful stuff. If a woman's husband suspects her of adultery (with no evidence) she must drink dirty water. If she swells up, then she is guilty and must be cursed. If not, no hard feelings. (Numbers 5:11-31) When a man picks up sticks on Saturday, he must be stoned to death (Numbers 15:32). When David rapes his neighbor and murders her husband, he gets scolded and the baby dies. God tells the Israelites which towns they can take slaves and concubines from (and how long to wait before raping the women whose husbands they have murdered), and in which towns they must kill every last infant (Deut 20:13-16, 21:10-13).

Some people think that God mellows a bit in the NT, but the introduction of hell now means that God is not content to destroy the wicked

(and the nice caring people who don't know about Him because they haven't heard), now they must be tortured—not for days or weeks like Latin American death squads, but for eternity. Why? Because it makes the undeserving recipients of heaven so much more grateful. (Romans 9:18-23)

Why would God create all of this in the first place? If He is perfect and complete in Himself, he doesn't need a buddy to talk to or a chorus of devotees telling Him for the rest of eternity how great He is. And yet, between all of the talk of God's love for us, Paul tells us that others, no less or more deserving than we, were created for eternal torture to glorify God.

What is heaven about? I am aware that the main picture we have of heaven is from John's symbol-laden vision on Patmos, and so may not be literally accurate. But does the idea of singing repetitive "praise choruses" 24-7 forever really appeal to anyone? For me to enjoy eternity, I'd have to stop being me. No person that bears any resemblance to the person I am now could enjoy living forever. I don't want to live forever. I'd like a few more years here on earth (where I really am very happy), but then I'm OK with not existing and letting someone else have a turn.

Regarding NT evidence of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the source itself concerns me. Of the 27 books in the NT, 16 or 17 were written by Paul (who never met Jesus and claims to have learned most of what he knows about him through visions (Galatians 1:11-18)) and Paul's followers Mark and Luke (who one might fairly presume had also not met Jesus). Of the others: Matthew does not claim an author internally but seems to be working from the same notes as Mark and Luke; John seems to be writing about a completely different Jesus—one who speaks in riddles and koans (much as John himself does in his epistles); Peter and Jude make weird statements that pastors and bible study leaders always have to struggle to avoid explaining;

and James is cool, but we don't know who he was. This is not meant to prove that the testimony of the NT is unreliable, but I'll need some strong supporting evidence to corroborate it if I am to base my life upon it.

Regarding evidence in nature, I don't find it convincing either. Christians have a history of using God to fill in the gaps of scientific knowledge (vitalism, creationism, intelligent design), but it has never worked out well. I left high school believing that I would be able to prove that evolution was a false idea. After studying the problem, I became convinced that evolution did take place, but that it need not be seen as contradicting the account of Genesis. I still believe that. The fact that we can explain how the laws of nature lead, without supernatural interference, from the big bang to us, cannot be taken as evidence against God. It does, though, mean that the existence of complexity in the universe can no longer be taken as an argument for the existence of God. There are still gaps in our knowledge, but the only one I think will likely always remain is why the universe exists rather than not. Christianity claims to explain this existence, but so does every other religion.

History is less kind. The venality of the church, the crusades, anti-semitism, schisms, the wars between the catholics and protestants, support of slavery and segregationism—none suggest that the church, the body of Christ, is receiving any sort of divine guidance. I know that individuals and movements arising from the church have done great good, and that Christians are “not perfect, just forgiven,” but shouldn't the body of believers whose lives have been transformed by a renewing of their minds have a bit better track record?

Getting to my personal experience gets to the core of the matter. I suppose that if I had seen strong personal evidences of God's power, I would be able to tolerate lack of other evidence. The fact is, though, that my personal experiences can be explained without reference to God. My “spiritual highs”

M*eanwhile, the lack of personal experience of the supernatural is covered up at church by the incessant use of metaphor.*

at retreats, in personal prayer, and at religious meetings are indistinguishable from “emotional highs” that anyone might have.

Long before I lost my faith, I lost interest in many aspects of prayer. Like most Christians, I was in the habit of praying for guidance. I never received any. After reading an InterVarsity Press book on spiritual guidance, I came to the conclusion (supported by the book) that God never claims in the bible that He will give specific instructions for our daily, or even major, decisions. Paul, for instance, doesn't ask God where he should go to preach; he just goes. When God gives him a vision telling him to reroute, it comes spontaneously, not in response to a request for guidance. Since I had never received specific guidance (for choosing a college, a career, where to live, or whom to marry), this made sense to me and I stopped praying for specific guidance, only for the wisdom to follow biblical guidance (love your neighbor, etc.).

I also stopped praying for healing. Christians and the people they pray for seem to get sick, get well, and die at the same rate as anyone else. I didn't resent that, but after observing it to be true for many years, I lost interest in continuing with the traditional “we believe, help our unbelief” prayer. I believed in God and in His power to heal. I just didn't believe anymore that prayers for healing had any more effect than “Thy will be done” prayers. In short, I was OK with adoration, confession, and thanksgiving; I just stopped bothering with supplication. This meant that answers to my prayers now provided no personal evidence of God in my life. But they never had anyway.

With no supernatural personal communications and no miraculous answers to prayer, I hoped that the experience of fellow Christians would help me see if I was missing

some important point. That hasn't happened. Starting at Caltech, the Christians I knew who had the most intense spiritual experiences seemed also to be the least believable. The denizens of “J's house” meetings couldn't explain why their ecstatic worship experiences were not in line with Paul's guidelines for orderly worship. They supplied us with prophecy, which varied between wrong and simply misguided. They believed that they could see a demon hanging out on someone's mattress and that they had to chase it from the room by sprinkling salt water and incantations. One person (who I always regarded as a “cloud without rain” (Jude 12)) would interfere with Caltech Christian Fellowship meetings with bizarre proclamations and confuse younger Christians with made-up doctrines. (He once told me that I could help a friend come to Christ by praying for the friend's sins to be transferred to me and then to Christ.) Since then it has continued to be my experience that Christians who claim to hear God's audible voice instructing them are the most likely to be biblically unsound in doctrine and morally undisciplined.

My Christian friends who don't speak in tongues or hear voices seem to fall along a spectrum based on their emotional nature. Those who are most emotional find their worship experience satisfying and uplifting, while those who are least emotional (there must be a better adjective for what I'm aiming at here) join in hopefully, but with some disappointment that they are not feeling the same excitement.

Meanwhile, the lack of personal experience of the supernatural is covered up at church by the incessant use of metaphor. Listen carefully sometime through a Sunday school class or church service, and see how often people avoid having to make a meaningful true statement about

their personal experience by simply filling in a Christian metaphor. I'm not meaning to criticize or make fun. These are sincere and intelligent people. It's just that we've developed a Christian culture in which phrases like "my walk with God" can substitute for meaningful communication.

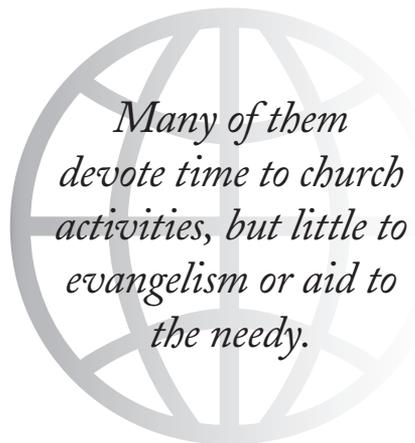
In addition, I see an inflation of anything that might be construed as personal evidence of God's work. A woman in our Sunday school class had, after two years of professional therapy, finally gotten over being depressed that she delivered by C-section. She emphatically insisted that this was a miracle on par with Jesus raising Lazarus or giving sight to Bartimaeus. Everyone in the room nodded in agreement. Perhaps they were just being polite—not wishing to gainsay the personal emotional experience of a friend who had been having a bad time of it. But I think there is also a sense in which Christians desperately want to see miracles, and are willing to accept as miraculous events that non-Christians would find merely fortuitous.

Another friend came back from a healing service announcing that her leg had been healed. When asked what had been the matter, she explained that one leg used to be a bit longer than the other, though not enough to cause a limp or any other outward sign. I have to wonder why she was healed while none of my friends at the cerebral palsy center were ever healed, despite their tremendous faith.

Add to this the fact that few if any at church admit to making much spiritual progress. The elderly may be the most faithful attenders, but spiritual zeal seems to peak between 16 and 26 for most people. Middle aged church folk seem vaguely embarrassed by the fact that most of their time is spent earning a living, maintaining their home, and raising their family. Many of them devote time to church activities, but little to evangelism or aid to the needy. Are Sunday school and bible studies people will confess over and over to failing to spend as much

time reading the bible and praying as they believe they ought—partly because they are nice people and haven't got much else in the way of sin to confess to show that they are humble and undeserving.

But if God is real and wants to have with each of us the living vibrant relationship we sing about on Sunday, then why do so many Christians find their "quiet time" to be so bland and unrewarding? If Christ has brought new life to every Christian, why do so many find evangelism to be so awkward? Could it be that when they



try to put their own personal experience into words it sounds lame and unconvincing?

I think I'd better stop there. I think you have enough now to get the idea.

Which is: I wonder, if Christianity is true, why the emphasis on faith? If God loves all people and wishes all to come to salvation, why doesn't He show Himself in a way that is far more immediate and convincing than what I've seen? Faithfulness is meritorious; faith, as I see it, is not.

So, at some point there came an Occam's razor moment. I realized that there was one simple hypothesis that would completely answer my hundred disparate questions: None of this is true. The bible doesn't have to make sense or be consistent because it was the work of people, not God. Events don't have to make moral sense—only physical sense, because there is no One in charge. Unrequited efforts to connect with God are unsurpris-

ing because there's no God to talk to. Oddly enough, I found this answer comforting because it resolved the tension of so many conundrums at once. Now I don't mind that the world doesn't make moral sense, because I don't expect it to. I still believe in the value of morality, but I value it for its results, not its source.

Please realize that I have not become anti-Christian. I manifestly don't want to interfere with anyone else's faith. Most of my friends are Christians, and I don't regard myself as any smarter, more logical, more sincere, or wiser than they. I don't think that anyone fooled me. I just don't believe what they do anymore.

Thanks for listening. Hope to see you soon. **IJFM**

[Editor's Note: See response on page 38.]