

July 13, 2008

## Atheism or Christianity?

We who are believers live in the same world as unbelievers. We laugh about some of the same things. We cry about some of the same things. They, like us, are often disappointed in Christians. They, like us, are often disappointed by the lack of progress in their own lives and growth. We both look at a very inhumane world filled with evil and pain and suffering. Sometimes our inhumane world reinforces the unbelief of unbelievers. And even with the pain and suffering, believers choose to believe in and bet our existence on a God we cannot see, cannot hear, and cannot prove. Unbelievers choose to bet their entire existence on the notion that such a God does not exist.

Before we enter into the discussion I want you to know that I am very biased. I believe that betting your life on God—staking everything on Him—is the sanest, most rational, most joyous choice that human being can make. So today I want to try and make the Case for Faith. I want us to look at some of those areas that are most troubling to people who would like to have faith, would like to believe, but are unable to do so because they struggle with questions that we don't have all the answers for.

We're going to look at three common asked questions:

Here's the first one: If believing in God is such a big deal to Him, **Why doesn't God make Himself more obvious?** Why doesn't He occasionally say "Boo" and shake the foundations of the world for effect? Why doesn't God give us more compelling proof and evidence?

One of the most famous atheists in the last century was Bertrand Russell. When he was ninety years old, he had a famous encounter with a woman at a party. The woman said to him: "Mr. Russell, you are not only the world's most famous atheist; you are maybe the world's oldest atheist. You will die soon. What will you do if, after you die, it turns out that God exists? What will you do if you come face-to-face with this God that you've defied your whole life long?" Bertrand Russell responded to her that he would point his finger at God and say: "You, Sir, gave us insufficient evidence."

I think I understand what he's saying. I know that's a terrible thing for a quasi-charismatic to admit, but there are times when I personally feel like I would like a little more evidence, *God, thank you very much*. But God seems to operate with a consistent MO. He presents himself to us in such a way that people who want to dismiss God will be able to dismiss Him. He seems to give them a lot of space to roam. So wide is that space that people who do not want there to be a God will find a way to believe that there is no God.

Another atheist philosopher named Norwood Russell Hanson said this: "I'm not a stubborn guy. I would become a theist, a believer, under some conditions. I'm open-minded. Then, he lays out the conditions under which he would believe: Suppose next Tuesday, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world are knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap. The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, and just then, as all the people of this world look up, the heavens open, the clouds part, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure, towering over the features of his Michaelangeloid face. Then he points down at me and explains for every man, woman and child to hear: "I've had quite enough of your too clever logic chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be ashamed, Norwood Russell Hanson. I do most certainly exist."

Those are Hanson's conditions for becoming a believer in God. Think about that for a moment. If that were to happen, Hanson would no doubt be impressed. But here's what I think—as time passed, as the shock wore off, as the moment faded, I think Hanson would find a way to dismiss it. I'm reminded of Paul's assertion in I Corinthians,

### **1 Corinthians 1:18**

**<sup>18</sup>The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**

So I suspect that with the passage of time Hanson would most likely relegate his experience to being a hallucination, or a strange dream, or the results of a vivid imagination, because people have been able to dismiss encounters with God for a long time.

The people of Israel would encounter God over and over again, and then they would just forget and wander away. Part of what this gets to is a deep issue:

**God's goal for the human race is not just to get people to be forced to admit that He exists.**

Forcing people to admit that God exists does not really solve the core problem of the human race because even if they admit that God exists, there is still the problem of the human heart.

For example imagine you're driving on the road and you see a black and white car with little cherry tops on top pulled off to the side of the road. *How many of you find that your intention to obey the speed limit goes up when you see that car?* What is that about us? What's happened here? Have you suddenly found that your heart has changed and now you find yourself loving the existence of a speed limit? *NO, it just means your practicing pain avoidance* and if the officer stops you—and that has probably happened to almost everyone in this room—you may even, in your secret heart of hearts, have bad thoughts about him.

You may find yourself thinking, “What is this guy doing stopping me when there are murdered and thieves running loose in the city even as we write this ticket! He ought to be chasing them instead of picking on honest, law-abiding, tax-paying people like me.”

Or you may find yourself thinking, “He's probably just after his quota. I know what these guys do. They have quotas; he's probably after his quota.” Some of you in this room have even tried to flirt with the officer to avoid getting the ticket. I am speaking specifically to females at this point.

But what happens is our that own darkness and self-preoccupation prevents us from seeing the officer objectively for who he is. We're projecting onto him our own fears, our own desires, our own selfishness, and our own darkness. Really this goes on all the time for us and affects all our relationships.

And when it come to seeing God, you multiply this a thousand times over and you begin to see God's problem in dealing with folks like us. It's first and foremost a matter of the heart. People can believe in the existence of God, believe in the supernatural but still be moral or spiritual disasters.

James put it like this:

**James 2:19**

**You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder.**

Now, do these demons believe that the One God is good and just and fair and loving? No. Do these demons believe the same things about this God that Jesus believed about His Father? No, not at all.

Simply acknowledging that the supernatural exists—that a God exists—doesn't solve the problem of the human heart.

This is part of why the Scriptures say:

**Jeremiah 29:13**

**You will seek Me and you will find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.**

What does it mean to “seek God with all my heart?” It means that I seek Him above everything else. More than money, or status, or success, or fame, or security, I want to know God. He promises that if you do that, you will find Him.

Of course, God is so good and so gracious that He also comes to people who search half-heartedly. He comes to people who aren't looking at all, and if there's any crack, any opening, God will come. But His promise is: If you search for me with all your heart, devotedly, persistently, sincerely, soberly, you will find me. If you don't know God, you owe it to yourself and to God to seek Him with all your heart. I hope you do. I hope you'll make that decision today. And if we, as a church, can help you in that, I hope you'll let us know. That would be privileged priority or us.

Second question that troubles folks sometimes is this one:

**If Christianity is really so life-changing why can't Christians walk their own talk?**

I mean if Christianity is true, why aren't Christians better advertisements for their product? Has that ever troubled you? There's real strong form that this objection takes. Sam Harris who wrote Letter to a Christian Nation and The End of Faith argues that Christianity and religion actually pose the greatest

threat to civilization and human survival. This has been a common theme since 9/11 and the emergence of the threat of terrorist attacks. Those who cite this objection will point to the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials and so on. They talk about how the Bible has been used historically to defend slavery, to defend the subjugation of women, to defend the “Divine Right of Kings.”

An atheist named Steven Weinberg puts it like this:

**“Good people do good things, and bad people do bad things, but to get good people to do bad things, that takes religion.”**

**Steve Weinberg**

I think a Christian response is to acknowledge that many horrible things have been done in the name of God, including the name of the God of the Bible. All of us who are Christians ought to look at some of these atrocities openly and honestly and humbly and not get defensive. Some people who have an historical axe to grind may exaggerate or distort it, but all of us should be open to truth. Peter says:

**1 Peter 4:17**

**Judgment must begin in the house of God.**

But then I think we also have to ask: Were these events, these horrible atrocities; were they the outcome of Jesus’ teachings? Were they the teachings of the Jesus who said, “Love your enemies.” The Jesus who said, “Bless those who persecute you.” The Jesus who said, “When somebody hits you, turn the other cheek.”

The Jesus who said on the Cross, “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.” Were things like the Crusades or the Inquisition the outcome of His teachings, or were they the contradiction of His teachings?

In fairness I think we also have to ask the question: “Has the human race done better in societies that seek to eliminate faith altogether? Has that experiment worked better?” Then you have to recognize that the greatest bloodbaths in the history of the human race have been recorded in the 20th century in countries that sought to eliminate God, worship and faith. Stalin is thought to have been responsible for 20,000,000 deaths. Mikhail Gorbachev put that estimate at closer to 35,000,000. Recent estimates

suggest that Mao Tse-Tung of China, was responsible for something like 70,000,000 deaths. Hitler, in Nazi Germany, was responsible for somewhere around 10,000,000 deaths. Then you look at despots like Pol Pot in Cambodia, an atheist regime where the estimate is that 26% of the population of an entire country was annihilated by a leader who said he had no accountability to God.

Church, I don't believe that evil on an international scale exists because of religious faith. No that comes about because of the innate darkness that resides in every human heart. Do a "thought experiment" on this with me. Just remove all religion. No worship. No churches. No God. No faith. No belief in the afterlife. Would that remove the bulk of the darkness in the human heart? I don't think so.

You see we've got this little thing going on deep inside of us (we talked about it last week)--correction--it's not a little thing, it's a big thing. It's called depravity. **Depravity – a state of moral corruption.**

It gets into our hearts very early on. I saw it in the hearts of my own children, whom I love. When Jamie was a little bitty fellow just getting to where he could pull himself up, just starting to walk—this was before the invent of the TV remote. He would gleefully make his way over to the TV set, pull himself up, impishly grin at us at turn the TV set off all the while I'm say "You better not turn that TV off! Don't you make Daddy get out of this chair!" But turning it off seemed to be worth the punishment. Now, what causes that? It is our depravity.

It's this depravity thing that's in every one of our hearts. You can do a little follow-up experiment. Imagine a society with no religion, no faith, no God. It's been tried. Do you want to tell me that if we eliminate all religion that will mean that no one in society going to covet someone else's money, nobody's going to covet someone else's house or somebody else's spouse, that people whose skin tones are different suddenly are going to become each other's devoted servants? You mean to tell me that just because religion is done away with, greedy people will become generous, angry people will become merciful, and bitter people will become grateful? You mean to tell me that just because religion and faith are done away with, Jerry Springer is going to be cancelled, and everybody will support PBS and listen to National Public Radio just because religion is abolished.

A more common objection than “that faith is terribly dangerous and violent” is the often absent-minded, run-of-the-mill observation that

**Christians are hypocrites.** My short response to that one is, “Yes, absolutely. We are. I am. Listen, I fall so far short of the values espouse, that I stand up and talk about and want to think I believe. Folks I preach a perfect gospel but I don’t’ always practice it.

I’ll tell you who else are hypocrites: non-Christians are hypocrites. And that’s not surprise. Again, this is just part of the human condition whether you are a believer or unbeliever. Think like posing, image management, spin control, exaggeration, having a way of popping up from time to time. You can say that you have faith, or you can say that you have no faith, but part of what Jesus and the prophets taught is that this is part of the human condition. We’re all in this boat. And by the way, Jesus’ promise is NOT: “If you become a follower of Mine, God’s going to make your life pleasant. God will get you that great job. You’ll be healthy, wealthy and wise. Something good is going to happen to you!” His promise is that He will relentlessly chip away at the sin and selfishness inside you so that one day you can become good news to people who need good news. And by the way, Jesus’ plan to change the world was not to assemble a group of great debaters who would be adversarial and who could out-argue everybody else. His plan was to create a community of people who actually build their lives on the presence and the power of God—a presence that overwhelms them so much that they become good news to the poor and so completely break down barriers between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, educated and uneducated, white and black, affluent and impoverished, and form a community of generosity and one-ness and inclusivity and love that becomes a light to a surrounding dark world.

That is still Jesus’ plan. That’s what we’re shooting for. In the meantime we most shoot one another in the foot.

The third troubling question:

**If there is really an all-loving, all-powerful, all-good and competent God overseeing the Universe, why is there so much evil and so much suffering and so much pain?** Natural disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes, accidents like car crashes and fires like their having in California, diseases like heart attacks, cancer, spinal bifida, Alzheimer’s and MS?

Steve Weinberg the atheist I mentioned earlier again says: “The God of birds and trees would also have to be the God of birth defects and cancer.”

Glenn and Twila Polk, members of our congregation and founders of Polk ministries and Ragtown Gospel Theatre, tragically lost a son over thirty years ago. Glenn and Twila were rehearsing for a play they were in involved in when their son wandered off (I believe he was twelve) climbed up into the rafters of the building they were in, slipped and fell to the concrete below directly in front of the stage. That was a horrifying event in their life.

And God certainly could have stopped it from happening, but He didn't. It was the beginning of a pain that no words could name. I'm sure the memory of how old their son would be must haunt them every birthday, every Christmas—thoughts of when he would have graduated from high school, maybe from college must remain with them to this day. Church, if our faith is going to mean anything, we have to talk like this.

And some of you have known this kind of never-completely-letting-go pain. And

- Sometimes Christians respond with bad answers.
- Sometimes we can be glib and insensitive.
- Sometimes we tell people that they have brought suffering on themselves by sinning. I hate that kind of judgmentalism.
- Sometimes we tell people that they have not been delivered because they do not have enough faith. I hate that kind of presumption.
- Sometimes we preachers have added to the enormous pain and suffering of people by suggesting that some natural disaster occurred as the result of God's judgment or due to some sin that the pet-project of the preacher's.

Why is there this kind of pain and suffering and evil in the world? Part of the answer is, “I don't know.” I do find it interesting that, in some religions; evil and suffering don't constitute the basis for an intellectual problem. In Hinduism, for example, suffering is a result of bad karma left over from a previous life. If you are suffering in this life, you're working off bad choices that you made in a past life. In Buddhism, both suffering and joy are understood to be illusory—the result of human desire. Thus, the goal of spiritual life is to eliminate desire so as to become immune to suffering and evil and pain. I have to say that those approaches to this particular issue

have never been able to make much sense to me. I do believe that God made human beings with a free will, and free will inevitably includes the capacity to do evil things and to bring suffering to others and free will introduced to our world the “fallen-ness” that we all recognize.

I do believe that God looks at earth from an eternal perspective, that God understands that one day suffering is going to be redeemed. I do believe that God sees this in a way that I don't, and that has to make his perspective different from mine, but I still don't have all the answers to them dilemma.

I do believe that the message of the Cross is that God has chosen to take the full weight of human suffering and cosmic evil and even what might be called “God-forsakenness” on Himself. Jesus said while on the cross, **“My God, My God. Why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34)**

I do believe that Jesus introduced us to a suffering God, something the world had never thought of before. I don't know the full answer, but I do know those things. I also am struck by the consequences of considering the alternative thought - that there is no God. If there is no God, there is no story.

But I'm not just struck by what might be called the “silence of God,” but also by the “silence of atheism”--the “silence of no God at all.” That silence is a silence which says, “That's all there is. Just silence.” No answer. No meaning. No nothing. The atheist responds and says, “Precisely.”

Richard Dawkins powerful critic of creationism and intelligent design puts it like this:

**“The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”**

**Richard Dawkins**

And you and I must choose what we're going to bet our lives on. I invite you to consider the two alternatives and their consequences. One of them, to paraphrase Bertrand Russell, is:

**“You are the product of causes that have no purpose or meaning. Your origin, your growth, your hopes, fears, loves, beliefs are the outcome of**

**accidental collections of atoms. No fire, heroism, or intensity of thought or feeling can preserve your life from beyond the grave. All the devotion, all the inspiration, all the labor of all the ages are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system. The whole temple of human achievement must inevitably be buried in the debris of a universe in ruins. And that's what we're all headed for."**

**Bertand Russell**

Does anybody want to vote for that one? Or will you choose this one by Dallas Willard:

**"You are the uniquely designed creation of a thoroughly good and unspeakably creative God. You are made in His image, with a capacity to reason, choose, love that sets you above all other life forms. God's aim in human history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with Himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant. He is even now at work to bring this about. You have been invited, at great cost to God Himself, to be part of this radiant community. You, right there in your life. You will not only survive death, you yourself were made to bear an eternal weight of glory you cannot now even fathom, and you will one day know."**

**Dallas Willard**

You must decide which one to bet your life on. A recent newspaper cartoon illustrated this wonderfully well. Two guys are going door-to-door introducing their religious beliefs. They are atheists. They stand in front of an open door and the man who opened it says, "This pamphlet is blank." They answer, "Yes, we're atheists."

You see, if there's no God, there's no story. There's nothing to write about. There's no guideline. There's no indicator. Nothing makes any difference. Do whatever you want to do! The pamphlet is blank. The atheist embraces that.

The mere fact that atheism might be depressing does not mean that it is false. If it's true, we might as well own up to it now. But we all have this sense, not just that life is hard, not just that we suffer ... we have this sense not just that things are bad, but that things are not the way they're supposed to be. Children are not supposed to grow up with nobody caring about them, nobody worrying about their education or their health just because they're

the wrong color. Women are not supposed to be abused. Dads are not supposed to die of cancer when they're 40 years old and their children are little.

If the universe is a machine, a giant accident, a blind, pitiless indifference, where did we get the idea that there is a way that things are supposed to be? Jesus said we have that idea because there is a way that things are supposed to be, and it is beautiful and glorious beyond imagining! The old Hebrew prophets used to talk about it, dream about it and they had a word for it: That word is SHALOM—all things the way that they are supposed to be. And one day they will be SHALOM. Our hunger for it keeps driving us to God. I would submit to you our running away from God is why it was broken in the first place.

This is a very simple picture. It is not philosophically profound, but it helps me to think about it in a simple way:

A lady went to a nail shop to have her nails manicured. As the beautician began to work, they began to have a good conversation about many subjects. When they eventually touched on God, the beautician said, "I don't believe God exists." "Why do you say that?" asked Sheryl, who has MS.

"Well, you just have to go out on the street to realize God doesn't exist.

Tell me, if God exists, would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain. I can't imagine loving a God who could allow all these things."

Sheryl thought for a moment. She didn't respond because she didn't want to start an argument. The beautician finished her job, and Sheryl left the shop.

Just after she left the beauty shop, she saw a woman in the street with long, stringy, dirty hair and not groomed at all. She looked dirty and unkempt.

Sheryl turned, entered the beauty shop again and said to the beautician:

"You know what? Beauticians do not exist." "How can you say that?" asked the surprised beautician. "I am here. I just worked on you. I exist."

"No," Sheryl exclaimed, "beauticians do not exist, because if they did there would be no people with dirty, long hair and appearing very unkempt like that woman outside!"

"Ah, but beauticians do exist," she answered. "The problem is, people do not come to me."

“Exactly,” Sheryl said. “That’s the point.”

God exists. What happens is, people have not come to Him. People have not looked for Him. None of us:

**Isaiah 53:6**

**All we like sheep have gone astray....**

That’s why there is pain and suffering.

I think next week we’ll talk about why faith in God makes more sense than any other alternative, but right now, Jesus comes ... especially to people with pain, especially to people with hurt. Jesus says, “I’m here, and if you’ll let me, I’ll love you.”

The pamphlet doesn’t have to be blank. There’s a story. There’s a hope.