



WESTMINSTER  
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# **Reason to Believe**

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*His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:3).*

I heard a conversation with a high school student on the radio once, where an interviewer asked what she wanted to be when she got older. The girl said, “I want to be a coroner.” That’s a rather unusual goal for someone in high school, so the interviewer said, “Really? Why a coroner?” And the girl replied, “Well, I want to be a medical doctor, but I don’t want anybody’s life to depend on it.”

I thought that young woman was very bright, and I hope she’s long since attained her vocational dream. But being prone to analogy as I am, and having spent so much of my life in the church, it occurred to me that some people practice a kind of coroner’s Christianity: they want to be involved in the field in some sense, but they really don’t want anyone’s life to depend on it – not even their own.

The Christian faith, for some people, is a life-changing thing, a commitment that fills them with purpose and meaning, and charts their whole course in this world, guiding every dimension of what they do. For others, it’s not like that at all. For them, Christianity is more like an interest confined to a particular piece of life – one activity among many others that has to be squeezed in around all their other priorities: work or school, family and friends, sports and hobbies and recreation. In their minds religion is just one compartment of life, like business or politics or entertainment or relationships.

You can tell when that’s the case because people with that view of faith often get upset if someone suggests that Christianity ought to inform all those other aspects of

their life. Preachers should stick to “religion,” they say, by which they mean some spiritualized compartment that’s kept in quarantine precisely so that it can’t interfere with any other part of life.

But Jesus says there is a good and loving God, from whom all things come and to whom all of us are accountable, and what God wants from each of us is to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We call that the Great Commandment. Jesus doesn’t tell us to love God with a little sliver of our heart, with whatever’s left over after all our other desires are satisfied. And he doesn’t say to love other people with some abstract, hypothetical benevolence that makes little or no practical difference. No, Jesus says that to follow him, to be a Christian, is to love God with all that is in us, and to love other people with the kind of commitment we naturally devote to loving ourselves.

With Jesus, there can be no dabbling in devotion to God. We’re either all in, or we’re not in at all.

Now of course it’s true that none of us is very good at living up to the Great Commandment. Even those of us who have been at it for a long time keep falling short, which is why confession comes near the beginning of our service every Sunday. But there’s a difference between wanting to be faithful and falling short, which is the common lot of every committed Christian, and practicing some pseudo-Christianity where a person’s life doesn’t really depend on it. The Bible describes this latter condition as “holding the form of religion but denying its power.”

One classic way of rousing people from complacency and calling them to commitment has been the “fire and

brimstone” sermon of the stereotypical old-time evangelist, which some churches still use even today. It involves, to paraphrase a familiar expression, trying to scare them out of hell. The revivalist’s appeal goes something like this: “If you die tonight before you give your life to Jesus, you will spend all eternity in hell, so come to Jesus now and avoid eternal punishment.”

There are lots of problems with that approach, beyond the obvious fact that it’s not the kind of message most people find compelling these days. One problem is that it appeals to fear rather than to love. The Bible says God is love, and while any sensible person should have a healthy fear of God in something like the way we fear lightning or anything else that has the power of life and death, still, the warm, inviting attraction of love is far more compelling than the cold, coercive push of fear in drawing people to God. Jesus invites people to himself and to God. He doesn’t drive them, or try to force them.

Another problem with fire and brimstone and fear is that it’s basically just one more appeal to selfishness: Come to Jesus so you can avoid the great penalty. But to frame Christianity primarily as some sort of “Get Out of Hell Free” card is to reinforce the very self-centeredness Jesus comes to save us from. It eclipses the call to love God and other people that Jesus says is the very purpose of life and the fruit of salvation.

Given all this focus on getting into heaven and avoiding hell, some nominal Christians treat their faith as a kind of hedge fund: they stay mainly invested in the other things they care about, but keep a portion of their portfolio in religion, hoping that will help them when the time comes and they really need it.

The seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal famously proposed an argument for faith that came to be called Pascal's Wager. He said there are only two possibilities: either the God Christians believe in is real or he is not. If God is real, then being faithful to God can result in a full life here and now and eternal joy in heaven, while not being faithful would mean missing out on all of that and possibly suffering an eternal loss. On the other hand, if there is no God, then not believing would be correct, of course; but believing in God could still lead to a much better and more satisfying life, even if the belief turned out to be mistaken.

Pascal's point was not to encourage nominal Christians to hedge their bets, just in case. Pascal himself was a deeply devoted Christian. He simply meant that a reasonable person should consider living as though God was real, because there would be much to gain even if there was no God, and infinitely more to gain if there is.

From the beginning of Christianity, people have lifted up all sorts of reasons to believe the gospel message. Some of those reasons have to do with evidence for the truth of biblical claims: why Jesus' disciples would have been willing to get beaten up and thrown in jail and even crucified for the sake of the gospel, unless they really had seen the risen Christ, for example; or why the things Jesus said about himself would be lies or mere lunacy if he was not in fact the Lord, the Son of God.

All sorts of arguments have been offered as reasons to believe the basic truth of the gospel, but it's not an open and shut case, of course. If the evidence for Christianity were incontrovertible, everyone who ever heard the message would be a Christian. Obviously, that's not the

case. There are reasonable doubts and thoughtful questions that believers ask, like everyone else – which is why religious belief really is a matter of faith.

And yet, faith is not unreasonable, or contrary to reason, as many atheists like to claim. Some of the reason to believe has to do with evidence that thoughtful people find compelling. But some of it is not so much about being convinced by evidence or arguments as it is about the quality of a truly committed Christian life.

At least since Plato, centuries before Jesus walked this earth, philosophers have said that the good, the true, and the beautiful converge. What is right conforms to what is true about ourselves and the world, and a life well lived according to the truth is not only good but beautiful. That's why we admire people whose lives embody the classical virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance or moderation, and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. What kind of person, after all, truly admires greed and vanity and the raw pursuit of self-serving power?

In fact, one more reason to believe is precisely the fact that Christianity shares some of the deepest insights of philosophers and other religious traditions that had nothing to do with Christianity, at least not explicitly. Isn't that what you'd expect if you really believed that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, the logic behind creation, the source of all that is true and good and beautiful? Wouldn't you expect genuine seekers of every time and place to catch glimpses of the truth, and strive to do what's right, and delight in all that is beautiful, even if they never heard the whole story in the way the gospel tells it?



In my view, there is every reason to believe the good news of the gospel. As the second letter of Peter says, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” It’s hard to imagine why the disciples would have made all this up at such a cost to themselves; and in any case, the story they tell rings true to the experience of faith even now.

I have several books in mind that I want to write someday, whenever I can find time to do that. One of them is called *Something to Believe: Letters on a Life of Faith*. Most of the book remains unwritten, but I already know what the last line will be.

I believe the Christian story is true, and I’m still trying to live as though it’s true in every dimension of life, because Christianity has implications everywhere and can’t be confined to some small segment of life. The end of my little book will freely admit that this gospel we believe in might not be true after all. That’s obviously a possibility.

But it’s a wonderful story, isn’t it? The story of a good God who made this world and still watches over it; who made human beings to share God’s likeness, and to love one another and be good stewards of God’s creation; and who loves the world so much that he became like us in order to redeem the world and help us become more like him – that’s a story about all that is good and true and beautiful.

And if somehow, contrary to all the faith and hope and love that shape our lives as believers, this great gospel story ever turned out not to be true, still I would say, it should have been. It’s such a beautiful story, and it’s the way I want to live.



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