

# How a Skeptical Philosopher Becomes a Christian

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*Use this page to make your own notes*

It is finally time for me to confess and explain, fully and publicly, that I am a Christian. Followers of this blog have probably guessed this, but it is past time to share my testimony properly. I am called to “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most effective ways to do so is to tell your conversion story. So, here is mine.

If you did not know this change, and if you knew me before 2020, this might be a surprise. Throughout my adult life, I have been a devotee of rationality, methodological skepticism, and a somewhat hard-nosed and no-nonsense (but always open-minded) rigor. I have a Ph.D. in philosophy, my training being in analytic philosophy, a field dominated by atheists and agnostics. Once, I slummed about the fringes of the Ayn Rand community, which is also heavily atheist. So, old friends and colleagues who lost touch might be surprised.

For one thing, though I spent over 35 years as a nonbeliever, I will not try to portray myself as a converted “enemy of the faith.” I never was; I was merely a skeptic. I especially hope to reach those who are as I once was: rational thinkers who are perhaps open to the idea, but simply not convinced.

I pray that this exercise in autobiography is not too vain. So I will try to state the unvarnished truth, on the theory that a story with “warts and all” will ring truer and persuade better. But if I am going to tell this story properly, I must start at the beginning, because my experience with God goes back to my childhood, and many waypoints in my journey since then have been relevant to more recent developments.

## Part 1: I lose my faith

I “ask too many questions”

I am converted to methodological skepticism

I am a confirmed agnostic

My reasons for disbelief fall away, one by one

I begin to read the Bible

## Part 2: I am converted

I re-examine the arguments for the existence of God

I try to explain Christianity

I am converted, quietly and uncomfortably

Church?

What I believe

Next plans?

# Part 1: I lose my faith

## I “ask too many questions”

Both my parents were born into the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, the more conservative of the two largest Lutheran denominations in the United States. One of my great-grandparents was a professor of musicology and church organist; we still have his books. My father was an elder in our church when I was a small child. I remember a few Bible commentaries on the bookshelves, which I found forbiddingly difficult.

Throughout my later childhood in Anchorage, Alaska, I was much given to asking “too many” questions. For example, I heard, as a child, much talk about “mind,” “spirit,” and “soul,” and I asked my parents—on the way to church, when I was perhaps eight—to explain the difference between these, or whether they were not perhaps the same. I repeatedly debated with friends about the origin of the universe, and discussed the question, “If we say we need God to explain where everything came from, then why don’t we need something to explain the existence of God?” I was confirmed at age 12 in the Lutheran Church, but soon after, my family stopped going to church.

As so many have, I lost my faith in my teen years. Dad started looking into New Age religions (he is now a more orthodox Christian again); this alone made the Bible less of a unique reference point for me. I remember a long ride, at age 13, south of Anchorage on the “Ski Train,” which still exists. I fell into a long discussion of various philosophical questions, mostly about God, with a colleague of my Dad’s. That made a big impression. Without realizing it, I probably stopped believing in God when I was 14 or 15: even today, I do seem to remember the belief slipping away, as I occasionally mused that I no longer prayed or went to church.

When I was a high school junior, I took Mr. Crawford’s one-semester introduction to philosophy. It changed me forever. After that course, I started spending a great deal of time thinking and writing about various philosophical questions, but especially about the existence of God, the problem of free will and determinism, and the possibility of knowledge. I never stopped.

I was 17 and four or five years had passed since my confirmation. In the intervening time, I had only rarely thought about God. But I started again, now in a philosophical mode, and it came as something of a discovery that I did not seem to believe in God anymore. At some point in my late teens, I remember calling up a pastor—I forget which—to ask skeptical questions. It felt bold for a teenager to do, but I was not merely being rebellious. I really needed help thinking these things through. But the pastor had no clear or strong answers. He seemed to be brushing me off and even to treat me with contempt. It seemed to me he did not care, and if anything, I had the impression that he felt threatened by me. This was a surprise. The damage

was quickly done: being met with hostile unconcern by a person I expected to be, well, *pastoral* confirmed me in my disbelief.

As I continued to think about philosophy, I decided more firmly that I would remain in my disbelief. In retrospect, I believe it hurt my belief very much to have been told that I should not ask so many questions. This is a terrible thing to say to a child, because he will infer (as I did) that only dogmatic people, who lack curiosity and are unable to answer hard questions, believe in God. Therefore, such a belief must be irrational. That is what I thought. How wrong I was, and how long it took me to discover my mistake. Apparently, it made no impression on me that many of the deepest thinkers in the history of Western civilization have been Bible believers.

## I am converted to methodological skepticism

In my late teens, I—now a cerebral, geeky youth—came to be driven by a skeptical chain of reasoning, which I remember well, because I rehearsed it so often:

1. I am familiar with people who have either ruined their lives or are well on their way. Moreover, practically everyone I know has some bad habits or has made serious, costly mistakes.
2. In all cases, the problems seem to be explainable by their believing certain falsehoods. (I was able to rehearse many sad cases and had various hypotheses about the “falsehoods” on which their personal failings were based. For example, the drug addicts falsely believed that drugs were a key to enlightenment.)
3. But such awful outcomes are avoidable, if I avoid believing dangerous falsehoods.
4. It seems to me that I can know that something is the case only under three conditions: (a) I know precisely what I believe; (b) I know why I believe it; and (c) I know that the reasons for belief are excellent. (In what way? I had different theories on this last part, which led me to pursue epistemology.)
5. Therefore, to avoid similar disasters, I should withhold (i.e., avoid holding) any belief that I do not know, with certainty, to be true. Moreover, I should make it my purpose in life to “seek the truth” (so I put it, to myself).

So that is how, at age 17, I became a philosopher and a so-called *methodological skeptic*. I discovered the latter term later, when I studied philosophy at college. It does not mean someone who believes knowledge is impossible; it means someone who withholds belief as a key methodological or truth-seeking strategy, in order to arrive at firmer knowledge at some later date.<sup>2</sup> Within a few years, I adopted a kind of foundationalism, the view that knowledge is ultimately justified by rational beliefs that are themselves not justified by other beliefs. In

my version, certain beliefs of perception and of common sense formed the foundation of the rest of my knowledge.

I arrived at college in 1986 knowing I was going to major in philosophy, and unlike most of my fellow students (even later, in graduate school), I was driven by a personal truth-seeking mission, a mission both moral and epistemological. I honestly did not understand why most people were uninterested in the questions I was asking. However abnormal, I thought I would try to build a system of philosophy of my own; it would have a firm rational basis but draw practical implications. To my disappointment, I learned that such a task had been declared naive and outdated at least fifty years before. Nevertheless, I thought I would eventually give it a try; so I aimed to become a college professor.

In those early years, I was dismayed by the irrationalism and nihilism I saw in the field. For all their attention to logic, it seemed to me few philosophers still adhered to a method of rationalistic truth-seeking. In lieu of anything better, I wound up reading works by a fellow unbeliever, Ayn Rand, who also thought there was an objective truth and that it could be discovered through rational methods. I ended up hanging out with Objectivists (as Ayn Rand devotees call themselves), but never quite fit in, mostly because they were dogmatists about many derivative matters, and I, with my methodological skepticism, was not.

Because of its devotion to free-thinking, I attended Reed College, which was full of liberal unbelievers (their unofficial motto: “Communism, Atheism, Free Love”). But I do remember discussing religion at some length with an earnest Christian, a few years older than me, who took a few courses there; his name was Phil Rees. Phil made a lasting impression; I still wonder what happened to him. We got to be friends, but one day, he caught me, well, let’s just say “in a sin.” He thoroughly criticized me, to my puzzlement—I really didn’t see what was wrong—and just like that, our friendship was over. That made a big impression on me, too, despite the fact that I did not feel *guilty* at the time. Yet I also did not feel quite comfortable; I suppose I received it as *an interesting datum*.

I started graduate school at Ohio State in 1992, where all my classes were in philosophy; the vast majority of the professors and my fellow grad students were nonbelievers. In those years, I felt no pull toward God. I considered myself agnostic, i.e., I neither believed nor disbelieved in the existence of God; I “withheld the proposition.” At some point in graduate school, I adopted an argument for my agnostic position. It went like this:

We are told that God, if God exists, is a spirit that, among other things, created the world with a thought (or “word”) from nothing (*ex nihilo*). But our only notion of “spirit” is understood by analogy with our own minds. As far as our own minds go, we have no experience whatever of thoughts bringing matter into existence from nothing. Therefore, we have no grounds on which to say we know what God even *is*. Therefore, any arguments that make use of the concept of God are literal nonsense.

More specifically, then, I said I had a “no concept” view of God, which one might distinguish from both atheism and agnosticism, both of which seem happy to employ the concept of

“God.” When I got serious about matters, I would say, “I do not even know what ‘God’ means.”<sup>3</sup> But generally I called myself an agnostic.

So I had no inclination to study or investigate religion per se, though philosophy of religion was a professional interest. As a student, I was exposed to plenty of arguments for the existence of God, and indeed I had known several since childhood. I often taught about them as part of introductory philosophy classes. Though I earnestly tried to understand why anyone might find them persuasive, I found them entirely unconvincing.

Once, however, one of my students came to the graduate assistant room and engaged me in conversation; this would have been, perhaps, 1994. He presented a version of the Argument from Design called the “Fine Tuning” Argument. (I will discuss it some more below.) Again, this made an impression on me; as I found I had no response, there were tears in my eyes, to my consternation. To this day I am not *quite* sure why. The student left quickly, no doubt tactfully leaving me to my thoughts. Perhaps I was only ashamed that I was unable to respond. But ever after that, as a nonbeliever, I always thought the Fine Tuning Argument was perhaps the strongest argument in the theist’s arsenal.

I remember attending a debate between Ohio State philosophy professor Neil Tennant and some Catholic thinker at Pontifical College Josephinum, the Catholic seminary in Columbus. I remember cheering, quietly, “Neil, Neil, he’s our man! If he can’t refute ‘em, nobody can!” I was rightly rebuked for being disrespectful by one of my fellow Ohio State grad students, and I felt duly shamed.

I decided in the mid-1990s not to pursue a career in academia after all. It is not quite relevant to discuss this in depth, so suffice to say that I rarely saw any sincere concern for truth, of the sort I had made my life’s mission. Contemporary academia appeared to me (and still does) largely a sterile game, with a methodology on some points incompatible with my own. This frankly ruined my appreciation for the search for philosophical truth in a modern (or postmodern) academic context. Still, I decided to go ahead and finish my dissertation, mostly out of my interest in the subject, and because I had spent so much time on it anyway.

After I defended my dissertation in 2000, and after I returned from California, having started Wikipedia in 2001, I taught philosophy for a few more years at Ohio State and local colleges. In that period I taught philosophy of religion twice (around 2003–5). It was fun to teach, and I set myself the goal of obscuring my own views to students. I remember asking at the end of one term, “How many of you think I am a theist?” A third of the hands went up. “An agnostic?” Another third. “An atheist?” Another third. I concluded the class, saying, “Excellent! That is exactly the outcome I wanted!” I wanted them, too, to seek the truth for themselves.

## I am a confirmed agnostic

I never aligned myself with the so-called New Atheists of the Dawkins and Dennett stripe. I found them crass and obnoxious. I partook, a bit, in discussions of atheism and agnosticism online, but, to my surprise, I found myself arguing more about methodology with the atheists than about God with the theists. Now, don't get me wrong. Even in the last few years leading up to my conversion, the arguments made in debates by theists like William Lane Craig still struck me as glib; he seemed to sidestep obvious problems that the non-philosopher atheists were usually not philosophically acute enough to pick up on. The approach that Craig and others took struck me as earnest, but ultimately intellectually dishonest. But the atheists were—to my disappointment, because I really wanted allies—actually worse. To me, they came across as clownish, often merely mocking, and apparently incapable of addressing anything but the most simplistic versions of the arguments. They insisted strongly that anyone who merely failed to believe in the existence of any god was properly called an “atheist.” Under such a definition, *I* was an atheist. Yet I was not like them: I was always willing to consider seriously the *possibility* that God exists. They were not. Nor was I very hostile to religion. I thought it obviously had some salutary effects. The atheists typically, by contrast, *said* that they simply lacked a belief that God exists, but their mocking attitude screamed that God *did not* exist. In my experience, the people who call themselves “atheists,” regardless of how they define this term, rarely take the possibility of God's existence seriously.

My experience studying and teaching the classic arguments had given me a modicum of respect for them. It seemed trivial, to me, to poke holes in such arguments, holes sufficiently large enough to justify my stance of withholding the conclusion. Perhaps the biggest complaint I had about the arguments was that none of them came even close to establishing that God, especially the God of the Bible, exists. They made partial headway, perhaps. For example, the First Cause Argument at best established that there was a first cause of the universe. The Argument from Contingency concluded that a necessary being exists. But what is that? Who knows? The Argument from Design supported the notion of a cosmic designer. But what sort of designer? In every case, most of the work still needed to be done: “Go ahead then,” I would say, “now show me that the first cause, the necessary being, or the designer is God, with all the rich meaning of that term. And even if you do that, you have not established that the God of *the Bible* exists.” Because nobody ever seemed to do that with any seriousness, I assumed that they could not.

There was one thing that I did frequently say, about the arguments for the existence of God, and that is that, perhaps, I did not understand them perfectly. I had studied enough of philosophy, as a methodological skeptic, to have developed this sort of reluctance or uncertainty. For example, William Alston had written a book with the puzzling title *Perceiving God*,<sup>4</sup> which for my dissertation I dipped into. This book develops a version of the so-called Argument from Religious Experience. That argument, in Alston's hands anyway, seemed beyond my ability to grasp: I mean, I was not having any religious experiences. I concluded



that, perhaps in the future, I might have a religious experience and thus “perceive God,” as Alston said is possible. I could not rule that out. (I was right not to.)

My attitude toward the rationality of belief in God was informed by my great respect for Alston as well as for Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne—hard-headed philosophers of the analytic tradition, but also Christians, whose work I had come across in subdisciplines outside of philosophy of religion.<sup>5</sup> So I always held that it was at least *rational* to believe in the existence of God, in some sense.

My attitude toward the Bible was also mixed at that time. Again, I knew that many brilliant minds had studied and loved it, finding it to be full of great wisdom. Still, based on the limited reading I had done, it struck me as being not much more than primitive Bronze Age myth and wisdom literature, with the miraculous bits probably based on rich imagination, misunderstood emotions, and other natural psychological experiences. It seemed to me that people who were most strongly committed to the search for truth, at least as sought through rational, methodological skepticism, could not take it seriously.

I should add at this point that two life events changed my understanding of ethics, and this mattered later for my conversion. The first was my marriage, in 2001, and the second was my first child, in 2006. After these events I certainly could no longer endorse Ayn Rand’s (in retrospect) ridiculous notion that we can somehow justify our moral obligations toward other people in terms of our own self-interest, no matter how “enlightened.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if I am willing to die for my wife and children, would I be acting in my *own* self-interest at all? I had always believed that morality had something to do with caring for other people. But, in caring for them, is it *my* interest that I care for, or *theirs*? I say this because, again, Rand made an impression on me between the ages of 16 and 26, or so, and her unbelief in God confirmed me in mine. But I was now firmly rejecting her ethics, which struck me as a clear lapse of judgment. Awareness of that lapse later made it easier to reject her atheism as well.

## **My reasons for disbelief fall away, one by one**

I stopped teaching philosophy in 2005 and started working full-time again on Internet projects. I went through many years without giving much thought to God, Jesus, or the Bible, except as cultural phenomena and as an ongoing philosophical interest. I continued to dream from time to time about writing a grand system of philosophy, but I knew that would take a lot of time and focused effort that I would probably never have. The New Atheism became, if anything, even more obnoxious, to the point where I was asking myself if I had ever been like that. I rarely was, anyway; I had too much respect for Christian family and friends. Similarly, I observed Christians on social media often (though not always) behaving with maturity and grace, while their critics often acted like obnoxious trolls. Some of my favorite people were Christian, too. And some of them were extremely intelligent. Strange.

The obnoxiousness of the growing anti-Christian sentiment actually made me defend them even on this blog. In 2011, I came across an article by atheist Peter Boghossian (before he had become so well known), titled, "[Should We Challenge Student Beliefs?](#)" His answer was "yes"; [I accused him](#) of bullying Christian students into trying to change their beliefs.<sup>7</sup> I also engaged a lot with atheists on Quora, mostly on the question of the very definitions of "atheism" and "agnosticism," before I [quit](#) and removed all my answers. The Quora atheists (like their Reddit and Wikipedia counterparts) were beyond obnoxious and yet rarely articulated anything remotely approaching an intelligent critique of theism. I knew that, because unlike them, I thought I was able to mount an intelligent critique, and I knew what one looked like.<sup>8</sup> I scanned books produced by New Atheists such as Dawkins and Harris and could never bring myself to actually buy one: they were just so transparently mediocre. Criticism of theism and Christianity presented such a rich field of strong argument, and I found virtually none in these books. In fairness, this is not so much the case with the philosopher atheists, whose work is more serious.<sup>9</sup> They were acting like indoctrinated adepts of a religious cult themselves, which I found to be just weird.

After enough years of dealing with these "adepts," the thought slowly dawned on me: maybe, just maybe, *I too* had been indoctrinated, in a way. Perhaps I had misunderstood things I only *thought* I had understood. Perhaps I had not been exposed to the best representatives of the faith. In short, perhaps, I had not given Christianity a fair shake. And yes, I couched this in terms of "Christianity" to myself: I never found any interest in other religions. This thought sat uncomfortably in the back of my mind for many years.

From around 2010 until the present, I exposed my two sons to the Bible, because this library between two covers is, after all, the most influential book in the history of the world, bar none. One cannot call oneself well educated in the West if one has not read it. Sometimes I read parts to my sons; this, however, did not make much of an impression on me. It was interesting literature, to be sure. I know now that I simply did not understand what I was reading very well. I merely assumed there wasn't anything *terribly* deep to understand.

While all this was happening, my thinking about morality evolved. In 2014-15, I wrote a couple of essays, "[How to end Western Civilization](#)" and "[Our Moral Abyss](#)," in which I bemoaned the worsening moral culture of the West, which I associated in part with the decline of religion. In the former, I wrote:

Critics of the religious right often seem to forget that Christianity as a moral culture, beyond its religious and political tenets, instructed people to work hard, to hope for a better life, to treat others kindly and donate to charity, to practice the graces of humility and self-respect, to rein in our passions and practice moderation, to take responsibility for ourselves and our dependents, and much more. It wasn't all good, but much of it was. It taught the very idea of obligation, which has grown much weaker for many of us. It was an organizing, all-encompassing, core part of the Western civic culture. But really no more. Many don't go to church; many of those who do go to

church don't believe; even those who do believe don't take religious moral strictures very seriously; even if they do, they probably don't understand them well; and finally, those who understand them aren't supported by most others, who are both ignorant and deculturated, and all too willing to "tolerate" all manner of sins. So, as I say, as a serious cultural force, inspiring us to live well, religion is a pale shadow of its former self. Even as a nonbeliever, this strikes me as a truly profound loss.

Even as I wrote this, I felt no closer to being a believer myself. Things began to change in 2017, I suppose, when I wrote a short blog post with the cheeky title, "[Could God have evolved?](#)" The argument was something to this effect: our technology today would look like magic to people of 1,000 years ago. But what if we are staring down the barrel of an AI-booster technological boom (sometimes called the Singularity)? Imagine another million years of societal evolution, supercharged by AI:

But what if there is some alien race that has evolved past where we are now for millions of years. Imagine that there is a billion-year-old superbeing. Is such a being possible? Consider the invention, computational power, genetic engineering, and other technological marvels we're witnessing today. Many sober heads think the advent of AI may usher in the Singularity within a few decades. What happens a million years after that? Could the being or beings that evolve create moons? Planets? Suns? Galaxies? Universes?

The conclusion of the post is *not* that this is what has happened. The conclusion is that if it is conceivable that a billion-year-old superbeing could bring about the existence of a universe indistinguishable from this one, then it ought to be conceivable that God exists. I was struck by this as a response to my "no concept" agnosticism (discussed above).

I then went through a couple of years with the uncomfortable thought that one of the central supports for my agnosticism had been knocked out from under me. This was unsettling, but not alarming. I never jealously guarded my unbelief. I never *feared* becoming religious. I was just unable to, because it struck me as entirely unjustifiable.

There was one last waypoint in the intellectual part of my journey back to God. In 2019, I wrote two more philosophical essays, a 7,000-word essay on ethical theory titled "[Why Be Moral](#)," and a companion piece, "[A Theory of Evil](#)." These are accounts of good and evil that root it in the natural value of life. I concluded the latter essay this way:

What makes humanity loveable, and what inspires the most devotion toward heroes and leaders, is the capacity for creation, the ability to invent, build, preserve, and restore whatever is good, i.e., that which supports and delights flourishing, well-ordered life. What makes evil individuals worthy of our righteous anger is their capacity for destruction of the good, due to their contempt for human life as such.

If so, then the love for God may be understood as a perfectly natural love of the supremely creative force in the universe. For what could be greater than the creator of the universe, and what could be more loveable? And then it certainly makes sense that they would regard Satan as a force most worthy of our hatred and condemnation, since Satan is held to be an essentially destructive entity, the one most contemptuous of human life as such.

In both essays, I positively mention Christian connections to ideas I was merely exploring. When I wrote this, I was not signaling a new belief in God—I was still quite agnostic. I was merely appealing to whatever Christian sentiments the reader might have in support of the theory of evil (and good, on which it was based) that I had developed. Sometimes nonbelievers do this. Nevertheless, it's true that this showed a change in attitude that had come over me. Whereas before I had been merely skeptical and cool toward Christianity, I now felt warm toward it. I had come to morally approve of it—it was not just tolerable, but positively likable.

The essay about evil was written in the summer of 2019, reflecting what had become a temporarily obsessive interest of mine: the horrors of the Jeffrey Epstein case were coming to light, and I had discovered that there have been groups of powerful, wealthy, and famous people who systematically raped children.<sup>10</sup> Before 2019, while I had [railed against Internet pedophiles](#), I had never heard of the notion that rich and influential pedophiles might be organized in criminal conspiracies to commit this most horrific of crimes. Like many at the time, the very idea filled me with a kind of existential horror. “What kind of world must we be living in,” I asked myself, “if our institutions allow this to happen with impunity?”

At the same time, I came to wonder if some such people took a keen interest in the occult, a topic that had never held the slightest interest for me. A friend of mine spent much time persuading me on this point, recommending any number of books about the occult that would make, for example, certain fashionable Hollywood religious movements clearer. I *started* reading those books and watching some videos, but I couldn't get very far into them. I am not entirely sure what restrained me, but the following line of thought had much to do with it: These people actually believe this weird stuff, obsessed with symbols, ritual, secrets, secret societies, and supposedly-ancient stories of gods. Yet it involves belief in actually-existent spiritual beings that can cause real-world effects. There were references to “sex magic,” an ancient and apparently ongoing practice. But this, some evil people apparently believe, becomes more potent when it involves sex with minors. That might explain some of the organized pedophilia. Historically, some of the people who pursued such occult ideas were brilliant and powerful.

What followed?

I drew two conclusions. First, if the occultists had spent all this time and taken such risks on such weird and reprehensible practices, then perhaps there is something to the very idea of a spirit world, which undergirds these practices. What if they engage in such hellish practices because there is actually something to the idea? I did not say so (nor do I now). Just ten years

earlier I would have scoffed. But I had become disturbed enough that I stopped reading those books, even critical books *about* the occult—because to learn about the occult just is to be inducted into the occult “mysteries.” After all, one of the things that one learns about the occult and its various secret societies is that they believe the knowledge itself is potent, that it opens doorways to the spiritual realm. If there was one thing that was clear to me, it was that I wanted such doors, if any there be, to remain firmly shut.

The second conclusion I drew is that, as my friend said and as was evident to me based on what I already knew, many of the occult ideas were perversions of ideas and themes in the Bible, the practices themselves dating back to Biblical times. *This* was a very weighty consideration. I thought that if I were going to learn anything about the occult, then, it stood to reason that I should first read the Bible cover-to-cover, this time for reasonably good understanding. I wanted merely to understand it on its own terms, that is, as its believers understand it. That would, I thought, help me to understand what the occultists were reacting to. I did not, of course, set out to convert myself. But one thing I told myself (and my friend) is that, if I started believing a spirit world actually existed, I would immediately believe in God, and I would certainly want to be on his side.

## I begin to read the Bible

Such thoughts were percolating in August and September of 2019. But it was not until the following December that I was looking for some bedtime reading, when it occurred to me, “I did want to read the Bible eventually. Why not that?” So I decided to go ahead and start.

I am not sure why I began to read the Bible so obsessively and carefully, as I did. Being trained as a close reader of difficult texts—the history of philosophy—I knew when I was not understanding properly, and now, finally, I *did* want to understand. Soon I was considering various Bible reading apps, including one that made it especially easy to find notes on particular verses as one read.<sup>11</sup> I made heavy use of this, looking up unfamiliar names, poring over maps, reading definitions of archaic words. I adopted one of the YouVersion Bible app’s easy-to-use 90-day study plans.<sup>12</sup> I immediately made Bible study a serious hobby, so that a month later I could write “[How I’m Reading the Bible in 90 Days](#).” I found a number of different study Bibles and commentaries, especially the *ESV Study Bible* and the notes by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown.

When I really sought to understand it, I found the Bible far more interesting and—to my shock and consternation—coherent than I was expecting. I looked up answers all my critical questions, thinking that perhaps others had not thought of issues I saw. I was wrong. Not only had they thought of all the issues, and more that I had not thought of, they had well-worked-out positions about them. I did not believe their answers, which sometimes struck me as contrived or unlikely. But often, they were shockingly plausible. The Bible could sustain interrogation; who knew? It slowly dawned on me that I was acquainting myself with

the two-thousand-year-old tradition of theology. I found myself positively *ashamed* to realize that, despite having a Ph.D. in philosophy, I had never really understood what theology even *is*. Theology is, I found, an attempt to systematize, harmonize, explicate, and to a certain extent justify the many, many ideas contained in the Bible. It is what rational people do when they try to come to grips with the Bible in all its richness. The notion that the Bible might actually be able to interestingly and plausibly sustain such treatment is a proposition that had never entered my head.

I also, fairly soon, started “talking to God.” This was experimental. After I had lost my faith as a child, I nevertheless continued occasionally *pretending* to dialogue with a supremely wise being about various issues in my life. It was a kind of therapy, a kind of play pretend with an imaginary friend (that is more or less how I put it to myself). So, I did that more explicitly now, but with God, being of course aware that this is suspiciously like prayer. I never once thought that the thoughts that appeared in my head were any but the products of my own imagination. (I still do not: I am not a prophet.)

What I would say now is that I had already begun to believe in God, but I was not ready to admit it to myself, nor could I easily reconcile it with my own philosophical commitments—especially not with my methodological skepticism. As a result, I wrote several documents, trying to explain various things to myself. If you will bear with me, I will next try to summarize some of the main thoughts I had then, which were instrumental in my coming to believe in the God of the Bible. Perhaps others, situated as I was then, will find this interesting.

## Part 2: I am converted

### I re-examine the arguments for the existence of God

As I found myself returning to the old arguments for the existence of God, I did not slap myself on the forehead and say, “Oh! It turns out that this is a great argument! I guess I believe in God after all!” Even today I deny that, individually, the traditional arguments for the existence of God are particularly persuasive. But I began to examine them in new versions. I was impressed by a lecture by philosopher of science and well-known apologist Stephen Meyer, who presented versions of the cosmological argument and the fine-tuning argument. Science says the Big Bang was the beginning of the universe. But whatever had a beginning has to have had an explanation. As this is the beginning of matter itself, it cannot have a *material* cause; thus it must have an *immaterial* cause (whatever that might be like). Similarly, certain features of the universe that are absolutely necessary to explaining how fundamental natural laws operate are physical constants. Physicists tell us that if the values of those constants were different, then various things could not have happened; for example, atoms

could not have formed, or stars could not have ignited and given off light and heat. But scientists have never offered an explanation for these constants.

I had a renewed appreciation for these arguments, but something still bothered me. Philosophers such as Meyer and William Lane Craig had seemed to depend on what skeptics call “the God of the gaps”: the force of the arguments depends on there being no explanation other than design by God. The routine response to this is: Perhaps somebody *will* eventually come up with explanations of these things. Making the inference that God exists depend on our ignorance does look like an argument from ignorance (a fallacy): “We cannot understand how this might be the case, and therefore God intended it, and he made it so.” That just doesn’t logically follow.

But on further consideration, the force of the latter response, familiar to skeptics, seemed to evaporate. Consider this (I thought to myself): There are, of course, an infinite number of values for the universal constants, and since there are quite a few such constants, a multiplicity of infinities of combinations. There might well be an explanation, indeed: but even if we had an explanation in hand, it would not remove our sense of awe and wonder in examining the outcome.

Yet we may get the same awe by inspecting *any* of the purported works of God. I urge you to follow this, because it is what made all the difference for me.

From the structure of galaxies to the orbits of the planets, from the movement of waves to the fates of mountains, from the origin of life to the complexity of man—there might well be an explanation of these things. Indeed it seems unsatisfying to say, “God flipped a coin” or “God picked a number” or “God just decided it would be that way.” But of course that is unsatisfying. That is hardly the point. Here is the real point: *Even if* we had a perfect scientific explanation of each of these things, the conjunction of the facts in our explanations seems to be driven by a purpose. If we could not state what these purposes were, then this would seem to be a merely superstitious, biased, religiously-driven claim. But the purposes are clear: The universal constants *permit* the existence of spacetime and the coalescence of matter, then stars and planets; certain unlikely chemical facts *are absolutely necessary* in order for life to exist; certain incredible leaps *seem designed* to lead life on earth ever onward to greater awareness and knowledge, culminating in man. If the very emergence of order seems to exhibit ends or purposes or designs, we may hypothesize a designer. Such a designer would not work *against* or *within* the order of the universe. That is not the point at all. Rather, such a designer would *create* the order of the universe. With the possible exception of miracles, there are no glitches in this created matrix, glitches that somehow make it more likely that the designer exists. The emergent scaffolding of order in the universe *is* the miracle.

On this view, the presence of mysterious “gaps” in the causal matrix that can only be understood by arbitrary, in themselves unaccountable, human-style “choices” would cheapen our idea of what a designer is like. As Einstein said, God does not play dice; rather, all the physical laws and constants, as well as the initial conditions of matter and energy, were

chosen *with the purpose* of bringing about the incredibly rational universe we see before us. The designer is *the source* of the rational order of the universe. If this being may be said to have a “will,” this will is not in place of rational physical explanations; rather, he willed all the physical explanations, and they are rational because they are the handiwork of the *logos* of the universe.

There are no fewer than *four* aspects both of scientific constants and of natural laws that suggest that, if they have any cause at all, then the cause must be spiritual or mind-like.

First, both constants and laws are as it were ideas or things subject to ratiocination. We have experience only of *minds* producing ideas. Second, if we are to suppose that constants and laws have causes, those causes would again not take the form of events, but rather supporting (timeless or eternal) states that explain them. But that suggests that their creator would be timeless or eternal after the same kind—again, as ideas may be said to be timeless. Third, whatever caused the covering laws and constants would have caused the existence of matter as well. So now we have an eternal creator, outside of space and time, with idea-like ratiocination of the universe it creates.

Fourth, there are analogical arguments in terms of the apparent *purposes* that a mind might have in producing these things. So we say: If we are already supposing a vaguely (unknowably) mind-like entity to explain the origin of matter and the laws and constants it operates under, then it does seem to make it more likely that this entity might have *purposes* and, it seems, that it has designed not only an existing universe but beautiful and evolving biological systems which seem particularly well suited to the flourishing of human life, if we live wisely. That suggests a fifth argument, then. One might well ascribe benevolence to this purposing, eternal, but unknowable (i.e., fundamentally mysterious) divine mind, considering that life on Earth can be pretty great if it is well lived.

This is a greatly condensed summary; I developed these ideas in much greater depth. But beyond such details, what I dwelled upon more than anything is the fact that the arguments *taken together* are far more persuasive than I had understood. Individually, the arguments might seem relatively weak. As I said, the Argument from Contingency only shows that a necessary being exists. The Argument from Causality shows only that the universe had a cause outside of itself. The Argument from Design shows only that the universe has some sort of designer or other. An Argument from Morality might add that the designer is benevolent, to some degree, in some way, but not even necessarily personal. But what happens when we combine all the arguments to make a unified case for the existence of God? I’m not sure the idea had ever dawned on me, certainly not with its present vividness. Taken together, the arguments point to a necessary being that exists apart from space, time, and matter. This is the very cause of the universe, which was designed according to orderly abstract laws. Ever more complex properties emerge, one from another, with great beauty and rationality—rationality that exhibits various mind-like features. This order can even be



described as *good*, a cosmos indeed, because life and its preservation seem to be part of the plan, and life is the very standard of value.

Such were the arguments I considered. And what if these arguments could be developed with some rigor? I asked myself. The result would be an Argument to the Best Explanation: consider all of the premises of all of these arguments as data to explain. Might “God exists” be the best explanation? It might, I conceded.

About the same time I began seriously weighing these ideas, I posted another essay to this blog: “[Why God Might Exist: A Dialogue Concerning Unnatural Religion](#).” It concludes this way: “If world-building technology might exist someday, God might exist today. And frankly, this rejection of my earlier Humean argument gives me more reason to re-examine other arguments about God.”

## **I try to explain Christianity**

This would not, however, have been enough to convince me of the existence of the God of the Bible, because so much of what is believed about that deity comes from the Bible and cannot be discovered by “pure reason.”<sup>13</sup> But as I read through the Bible and sought out explanations of various matters, a picture developed—one that I think is still correct in most of its particulars—that helped me to take much more seriously this book that I once dismissed as the work of “Bronze Age shepherds.” I quote something I wrote two months after I began my intensive biblical study, which I still think is pretty much right:<sup>14</sup>

Ever since I began to read the Bible I have frankly asked myself questions—well, to put it more precisely, I took myself to be putting the questions to God, as it were having a dialogue with him—and I seemed to be told that I lacked wisdom, that not all would be revealed to me at this time, that I should not expect anything that had not already been revealed in Scripture, and that I should keep reading and studying. That was essentially the only way I would learn what was available (about the divine, anyway) for me to learn.

Aside from the most basic question about whether God exists at all, the question that most frequently occurred to me as I read Genesis, Job, Exodus, Leviticus, and now Numbers (in approximately that order—chronological order), is how it could be that God manifested himself to seemingly crude people in apparently crude ways. Job helped a great deal with that. Our notions of divine justice are not to be expected of God. God reserves considerations to himself that we evidently cannot possibly understand.

But there is another layer that I have come to suspect, which suggests an answer to an even deeper and broader question about God: How, generally, should we expect an otherworldly, supernatural being to interact with human beings? Why make himself known in a particular place,

to particular people? Indeed, God told one prophet very explicitly that he deliberately hid himself even from his own chosen people, while there are also prophecies to the effect that he would make himself known much more easily and widely at some later time.

But why not make himself known to everyone at once? There are of course a number of other such questions, and I suppose what all such questions have in common is this: Why did God choose to make himself known in the ways described in scripture? If this method of divine self-revelation is not plausible, then that seems to be a reason to reject scripture. Indeed that has perhaps been one reason I have found the Bible largely irrelevant to my concerns for several decades. But now that I read it again, I am rather suddenly able to formulate a theory that makes the Biblical narrative much more plausible than I previously understood it to be. And this, in turn, makes belief in the Christian God much easier, insofar as this narrative reveals what God's plan is, and his plan makes more sense now.

When man first appeared on the scene, he was able to take joy in the presence of God for the simple reason that that man was pure and without sin. Precisely why God cares so greatly and abidingly about the importance of purity is something that I can explore later; suffice it to say that he does care very much, so much that the achievement of such purity is perhaps, in a way, God's purpose for us on earth.

Man, of course, exercised his free will and while he chose for a time to live in the pure and holy presence of God, he violated God's very first commandment (not to eat of the tree) and, having thus become impure, was cast out. Without the immediate influence of God, he was for the most part too unformed, too wild, to be relied upon to pass along much culture of any sort. Much of humanity immediately became absolutely savage and simply evil. God might have lived among such people, perhaps, but only by violating his own holiness; and then, too, people would become rebellious slaves to his will, rather than acting with their own free will. But after some time there came a man who was worthy of a relationship with God; he and his family were saved by God, even as God wiped out the rest of humanity with a worldwide flood.

(Whether this famous story is literal or metaphorical—the literal meaning of the metaphor being a stage in the development of humanity—may not matter.)

When Abraham came along, it seems God unleashed a plan. The plan was, in short, to set up a basically decent man, Abraham himself, who would start a basically decent family, who would found a basically decent tribe, the tribe of Joseph and his brothers and their children in Egypt, who would in turn found a basically decent nation. It would be the responsibility of that nation to carry the message of God to the world.

The family was, for whatever basic decency it might possess, famously imperfect and sinful. It repeatedly fell away from God, sometimes far away. God saw that it was necessary to make a

covenant with the man, the family, and later the tribe and the nation. If they would learn to carry out his law, with faith and wisdom, he would make them a mighty people. But if they did not, he would allow their enemies to put the people into bondage. As various parts of his mandate, God made ordinances, rituals, and practices that would teach the people both purity and holiness, which means apartness. Over time, they were to become “a people apart,” and indeed they remained so—more or less—for over a thousand years.

As the centuries rolled on and the nation rose and fell, and rose again, it was given to the prophets of this people to understand that God’s plan was not concluded. It was never enough that he be God of this nation alone, of course; for, as he told Abraham in the beginning, he was God of all of mankind, not just a tribe or nation. He had a plan to transform all of mankind into something more pure and holy, set apart from from their own sin.

So it was never going to be sufficient for there to be just one holy people; the Jews were never going to take over the world and impose God’s law by force. He gave military victory to his people only by way of preserving them in their land, which enabled them to practice their holiness. For whatever reason, it was not God’s way to impose a theocratic rule on unwilling nations by military force. Neither the Jews nor later the Christians were, in their original or pure forms, an empire-building, militaristic people. To be sure, later Christians had armies and did conquer other lands, thinking their success to be divinely ordained; but the Bible gave no indication that it ever would be.

The religion of Abraham and Moses was a crucial antecedent to Christianity because Christianity simply could not have taken root except in the context of centuries of tradition, repeatedly taught to the people of Israel directly and through law, ritual, and prophecy, of the deep, abiding importance of purity. This is not to say God could not have achieved the same purpose in some other way; but he was, as much as he could be, “hands-off” in the unfolding of his plan. Presumably this is because he wanted his people both individually and as nations to approach him deliberately and voluntarily, ultimately through the purifying indwelling of the Holy Spirit, not through force.

There were other religions, to be sure, with other, typically incorrect ideas of the divine, and they too had ideas of right and wrong and indeed of purity. Was this the Holy Spirit moving through them? I don’t claim to know. I can see reasons to think so and also to think not. What is clear is that, for both Jews and Christians, God really did have only one chosen people. Why? Why have a “chosen people” at all?

In 1000 B.C., if you were an Israelite, you might well have thought the answer is: to teach the world (somehow) about the law of Jehovah, perhaps ultimately through military force. But a thousand years later, if you were a Christian, the answer was clearer: repeated experience had shown that military conquest is destructive and evil, the portion of proud but doomed nations.

Jesus, by contrast, is the fulfillment of the Messiah prophecies. And Jesus was no ordinary king or prophet. He was to sit at the right hand of God, to be the savior of not just Israel but the world. His name would be Immanuel, or God with us: that is, finally, God's people would be ready to receive God incarnate and the spirit of God into their midst. Thus while he was King of Kings, he was also Prince of Peace: his kingdom would be within, not one of world conquest.

No other people could have received Jesus and been affected by him as the Jews were, for not only did he fulfill their Messiah prophecies, but those prophecies and the moral character of Christ were deeply imbued with the law and wisdom of Jehovah, repeated over and over from the times of the Patriarchs. No other people than the Jews could have given rise to Christianity. A man who began as a staunch follower of Jewish law, the Pharisee Saul, a Roman citizen who was also educated in the dominant Greco-Roman culture, became perhaps the most effective in spreading Christianity: the Apostle Paul. Perhaps only a Roman Pharisee could have become such an effective advocate for the Lord's message.

And what was that message? That we must and can only be purified, as God wants us to be, through Jesus, who died for our sins. This has become formulaic, puzzling, and meaningless for most people. But the basic meaning goes back to the story of the Fall: God insisted on purity. But man by himself never had a chance, outside of God's presence, to make himself so. At first it was through ritual sacrifice and atonement (i.e., essentially, washing away sins) that the people of Israel were supposed to be made pure. But they never really were. Only when "the perfect lamb of God" was sacrificed on the cross was humanity truly redeemed, or "made good," i.e., even possibly pure and holy.

But this purifying sacrifice could take effect within a person only if he really were in a relationship with God, through Jesus. This must not be misunderstood in an absurd way. Jesus just is God; when he came to Earth, he was made flesh. If only God is holy, then how else could we be expected to be made holy except by the direct intercession of God himself?

Presumably, we could have entered into a spiritual relationship with Jesus even if he had not been sacrificed on the cross. God was putting an end to the sacrifices of the ancient Hebrews through this sacrifice, impressing upon them in a way they would understand intimately (even if it is very strange-sounding to us) that this was indeed God.

It is not Jesus' miracles during his Gospel ministry that ultimately sold the message for the first Christians—perhaps their cult would have died out if it had not been for the resurrection. Thus when they preached about "Christ crucified," they were really preaching "Christ resurrected," and thus "Christ the perfect sacrifice," the Lamb of God and Savior of the world. This was deeply impressive to the sympathetic elements among the Jews, and you probably cannot really understand how, and be similarly impressed, unless you have properly absorbed the Old Testament. I am not sure I have absorbed it myself properly yet.

Jesus is thus the perfect intercessor. We pray to him and thereby pray to God. We ask him to forgive our sins and to make us pure and holy, or as holy as we can be made. The reason that “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” is that the sinlessness of Jesus rubs off on us if we are right with him.

This has been God’s plan from the beginning: We should always be consulting Jesus through his spirit, the Holy Spirit, which is the same as God’s spirit since the person of Jesus just is God made flesh. The closer we are to Jesus, the better people we will be.

The notion that there is some important dispute between being “saved by faith” and being “saved by works” strikes me as unnecessary. We are saved by God, by being touched by Jesus through the Holy Spirit and by being made pure and holy—“set apart” from the evil of the world and from our own sin, and thereby we do good works.

In any event, arguably, the covenant made with Abraham is coming to pass. More and more of the world has been exposed to Christianity; more and more people have had the opportunity to understand how to relate to God, and why that is important.

There is much that I have left out of this narrative—much I might want to include in a fuller narrative. For one thing, why does God care so much about moral purity? For this we must understand that for God, purity ultimately is about the preservation of life. The Mosaic law of ritual sacrifice and cleansing was all about preserving the lives of his people and those parts of his creation not set aside for the sustenance of man—and about avoiding anything that had touched death. Not for nothing did Jesus call himself “the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>15</sup>

There is much else I am still puzzled about, which I would like to work out, but I don’t think I should try until I have read more. For example, all the stuff about angels, Satan, demons, heaven, and maybe especially hell. While perhaps we can understand that God is just and wants only good people in heaven, is it necessary that people be burned and subjected to endless, disproportionate, and presumably avoidable torture?

And what happens to people who have not heard of the word of God?

More later, then, of course. But I am glad I seem to have worked out this much. It has never been so clear to me. The strange behavior of God is necessary to “prepare the way” for the savior of all mankind, and God has not shown his face since then, as far as we know, because he has done his job and the Word of God is still being spread through every land.

## I am converted, quietly and uncomfortably

I had the above thoughts *before* I considered myself a believer. There was a period of about two or three months when I would have been uncomfortable if someone had asked me, “Do you believe in God?” Logically, there is no mid-position between agnosticism and theism. But I wouldn’t have wanted to affirm either position. I suppose this made me still an agnostic, but I was now increasingly prepared to believe, and even to admit the belief to myself, to some extent.

To be sure, I had issues—and to work through them, I began writing a document called “A Rationalist Approaches Christianity,” which [I put on my blog](#) but then removed.<sup>16</sup> I actually started it *before* I considered myself a believer. It was, in fact, instrumental in my conversion process. It explores the epistemological problems and how I might go about actually rationally supporting belief in God and adoption of Christian doctrine.

Nevertheless, at some point, I would have said, “If you deny believing that God exists *now*, you’re just fooling yourself.” And there was a moment, soon after I started reading the Gospels (toward the end of February, 2020), when I said I should admit to myself that I now believe in God, and pray to God properly. I did so, silently and eyes closed, lying in bed. I’m not saying this is what I *should* have done, but it is what I did. It was anti-climactic. I never had a mind-blowing conversion experience. I approached faith in God slowly and reluctantly—with great interest, yes, but filled with confusion and consternation. In fact, as late as April I was still saying I had a “provisional Christian belief.”

Throughout that spring, I was very uncomfortable because I knew that accepting the proposition that God exists was tantamount to rejecting methodological skepticism. I knew (and still admit) that what rational reasons I had to believe did not rise to the level of rigorous proof. I frankly wondered if what I was doing was irrational. What *was* I doing?

I had another reason for discomfort: I reflected that my apparent conversion was not motivated out of distress over my sin. This is non-standard; was I not supposed to accept Jesus *as my savior*? Isn’t that the *sine qua non* of Christian faith? At the time, although I might have been able to explain intellectually why Jesus is my savior,<sup>17</sup> I didn’t *feel* especially distressed over my sin. I said I believed in God and that Jesus is the Son of God, but really, did I thank Jesus for saving me from my sins? I felt I should, but perhaps I could not in all sincerity. I didn’t really *understand* that part. It would entail a bunch of *other* things that, to be honest, I still had not worked out for myself.

When I finished the Bible, I started immediately again (and I have never stopped since). This time I read with a group of people I was able to convene, including—to my delight—my mother, my father, and my sister, all of whom had long been believers, as well as some friends and strangers. Even to these people I did not say that I was a believer; I said that I was studying the Bible. I didn’t say or even imply it publicly for several more months, and then only tentatively. I lived in fear that one of my old atheistic acquaintances or detractors (of

which I once had many, due to Wikipedia) would call on me to defend my faith and that I would not be able to do a good job. (I suppose I have waited this long because now I feel I can do a better job.)

I said I believed in God and that Jesus is the Son of God. But did I say that Jesus saved me from my sins? For a while, this made me nervous—but only for a while.

At some point I got it in my head that I should lay out a fairly simple version of the arguments—summarized above—for the existence of God. I posted it on my blog in mid-June, 2020, calling it simply “God Exists.” After some weeks, I made it password-protected. It was becoming unwieldy in length (25,000 words) and I thought it was becoming a book. I got some excellent early feedback from a few friends, for which I am very grateful. I went on to work on *God Exists: A Philosophical Case for the Christian God* until now. I am still not finished. Later, I adopted a discipline, which I have been surprisingly, even preternaturally good (for me) at following: I work on it five days a week, a half-hour per day. The text has gone through two major revisions since that first June version and is presently—if you’ll believe it—203,484 words. It’s far too long for most publishers, so I’m not sure what I will do about that. One distinguished professor of theology has given me some very encouraging praise, which helped me stick to it. I don’t know when it will be done. Possibly not for years. Possibly it will appear in two volumes. Possibly a shortened version will appear first.

I also began a course of theological study, which I have stuck to essentially daily, and which has become my main hobby; I have read many theological books over the last five years. You can see some of the fruit of this study, if you like, in various blog posts and videos. My purpose is not to make myself into a preacher (I’m sure I lack the necessary charisma and other aptitude), but to prepare myself to join the ranks of the defenders of the faith.

It was only time, study, and (I hope) humble reflection that finally brought me to something like an orthodox Christian faith. I certainly did, eventually, come to better appreciate my own sinfulness and why one of our deepest obligations is to be thankful to God for adopting me into his family and forgiving my many sins. I thank God for what share of insight his Word and his faithful servants have given me, as I have studied them; I thank him for the gift of faith that, for most of my life, I never imagined I would have. By the way, by “faith” I do not mean that I believe absurdities against reason. Rather, what I *accept* (on, I think, quite rational grounds) is the full body of Christian doctrine as taught in the Bible; but my *faith* is in God, which is to say, I am loyal to him and to his Son and his Holy Spirit, who are one.

## Church?

I did not immediately go off to church. I did try going, for the first time as a believer since childhood, in maybe May 2020, and the next time I wanted to go, services had closed due to Covid.

I am sorry to say that I have not yet adopted a church home. I have visited four local churches, each only a few times just to see how they work, and visited the websites of literally dozens of other local churches. I have researched denominations quite a bit. While I think I am called to worship with my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, face to face, I am aware that my presence is probably going to be like, well, a bull in a china shop, if I am not very careful. For one thing, I *still* “ask too many questions.” I am still probably not as deferential to authority as I should be. I simply don’t want to make a nuisance of myself, and I know myself well enough, and how people react to me, to know that I *would* make a nuisance of myself. Once I have figured out my full adherence (or reconciled myself to what differences remain) to some denomination, I will be less of a nuisance to a congregation. I am still working out my views on many issues (e.g., [the Lord’s Supper](#) and [sola scriptura](#)).

I am explaining, not defending, my failure to attend church. It’s a high priority that I figure out what I need to and get myself to church. And I’m *not* saying others should do the same, i.e., waiting until they think they’ve got things reasonably well figured out. I know that many people continue to study and change their minds on issues for many years, all while attending services at the same church.

Speaking only for myself, I don’t want to join a church—basically, becoming part of a family—only to feel I must leave after a year or two because I have finally gotten around to thinking hard about some fairly basic issue, and now I see a different denomination is closer to my views. I might feel obligated to do that, and it would be my own fault. Not only that, I know that in my honest frankness I’d eventually raise questions, and my questions (and my very presence, given my background and habits) would be very disruptive *unless* I were already on board. I would *never* want to undermine the pastor in any way, shape, or form, on matters of doctrine, particularly if he’s simply following his confessional standards or doctrinal statements.

For example, I might consider going back to my childhood church, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, but I’m fairly sure I’d need to go on disagreeing with them about the meaning of the communion. *That* seems possible. (I doubt the meaning of the communion need keep me out of the LCMS.) But I wouldn’t want to start debating the pastor about that; I’d better make sure I’m on board.

This is especially the case if I’m going to continue doing theological blogs and videos (and, in time, books). I wouldn’t want to start publicly contradicting my own denomination.



## What I believe

This is already a very long post, but I feel that if I'm going to "share my testimony" properly, I ought to conclude with what I now believe.

I believe there is one God, in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.<sup>18</sup> We do not know, nor is it given to us to know, how this works precisely, but we can know enough to be reasonably assured.<sup>19</sup> The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.<sup>20</sup> Jesus was the incarnation of God and filled with the Spirit.<sup>21</sup> The Father begets the Son and sends his Spirit to us.<sup>22</sup> They are all one, alike in essence and attributes but distinct in their persons.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it is helpful to attempt to characterize the persons this way: the Father is the creator and sustainer of all.<sup>24</sup> The Son is the eternally begotten and creative Word of God, his messenger among us.<sup>25</sup> The Spirit is God's presence throughout the creation and dwelling in his faithful children.<sup>26</sup>

The Lord made the world and us in it, and while at first man was without sin and dwelt with him, man fell from grace through sin.<sup>27</sup> We are sinful by nature.<sup>28</sup> That is, we have been given the ability to act according to our own rational deliberation—which is what free will is—but, because of our foolishness, we make bad choices, which lead, inevitably, to bad habits.<sup>29</sup> We are unworthy to be in the presence of the Holy God.<sup>30</sup> Yet he loves us, for we are at the apex of the worldly creation; his greatest wish for us is that we be reunited with him in love.<sup>31</sup> He wishes to be our father and that we be his loving children.<sup>32</sup> But we cannot possibly merit such a union.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, without his help, there is nothing we can possibly do to escape our tendency to sin or to be worthy of the forgiveness of our sins.<sup>34</sup> Without his help, death will come the final and irrevocable end of our opportunity to live with him.<sup>35</sup> It might even, as the Bible sometimes appears to say, mean eternal conscious torment in Hell; it will certainly mean our ultimate destruction, at least, again unless we accept his help.<sup>36</sup>

The Bible, which is the inerrant word of God, reveals his plan for our salvation from such destruction.<sup>37</sup> Our doctrines of the things of God must be rooted in the Word of God as revealed through his Prophets, Messiah, and Apostles.<sup>38</sup> To Abraham and his offspring he revealed a plan to save the world through one chosen people.<sup>39</sup> There was a period of tutelage, as it were, in which God impressed upon the Hebrews the necessity of obedience to the law, in the context of a just nation.<sup>40</sup> God had the Hebrews sacrifice costly living beings to demonstrate their repentance and recommit themselves to righteousness, and then their sins would be forgiven.<sup>41</sup> But the Jewish nation constantly fell into tyranny and vice, their sacrifices becoming insincere shams; in this, they proved themselves to be no different from the nations around them.<sup>42</sup> Through many prophets, God also revealed that, only when his Anointed One would one day live among them, being indeed Immanuel, "God with us," would his Spirit be poured out over not just the Jews but all nations.<sup>43</sup> Then, no longer would the hearts of the people be hardened by sin; they would be part of the Kingdom of God and once again live in his presence.<sup>44</sup>

Jesus of Nazareth was this Immanuel. He was God With Us: the Son of God, approved and empowered by the Holy Spirit, he was one with God.<sup>45</sup> He showed his divine power in his ministry, which was full of signs and wonders, healing every kind of ailment, even raising people from the dead.<sup>46</sup> Repent of your sins, he said, and you will be forgiven, for the promised Kingdom of God is at hand.<sup>47</sup> But God's justice established the law, and the law demanded a true cleansing sacrifice, demonstrating a final end to the wrath of God at sin.<sup>48</sup> And so Jesus, God with us, made himself the sacrifice, allowing himself to be crucified, giving up his life for the love of humanity.<sup>49</sup> No longer would any sacrifices need to be made: our sins were forgiven once and for all if we repented and turned our loyalties exclusively to God With Us.<sup>50</sup> Jesus rose on the third day in an imperishable body, demonstrating his mastery over death.<sup>51</sup> He gave meaning to what he had said: our sins will be forgiven and we too will be raised on the last day if, accepting his sacrifice as if it were our own in our most profound thanks, we adhere to him.<sup>52</sup>

This resurrection unified his disciples into a permanent worldwide movement, the universal Church.<sup>53</sup> As he had promised, he sent his Holy Spirit into the world, first to his Apostles and then in widening circles to the world, to dwell in the hearts of all those who are loyal to him.<sup>54</sup> We can, without further sacrifices and with the help of the Spirit, demonstrate sorrow at our own sin and turn to a better way.<sup>55</sup> Jesus asked us to spread the good news of the coming of his Kingdom, which has been the mission of his Church: worshiping God, preaching the Gospel, baptizing new converts, and reminding us of his loving sacrifice in the Lord's Supper.<sup>56</sup> The subjects of the Kingdom of God are found in every inhabited continent, of every race, and in many Christian traditions, the true faithful of which make up what is, indeed, the universal Church; for salvation depends on genuine adherence to him rather than doctrinal or ecclesiastical perfection.<sup>57</sup> I disavow any aim to unify multiple incompatible Christian traditions, except under the direct headship of the returned Christ.<sup>58</sup> Nor do I say all traditions are equally correct on theological points—only that some of the adherents of many (possibly in part incorrect) traditions really are genuine followers of the one true Christ.<sup>59</sup>

He will return to us one day, bodily, and a new heaven and a new earth will be created.<sup>60</sup> There will be an end to sin and with it an end to suffering and death.<sup>61</sup> This is our great hope, which we ought to keep in mind when we are faced with our troubles here in this life.<sup>62</sup> For now, we are called to live righteous, godly lives, loving God and our neighbors come what may, as innocent as lambs and wise as serpents,<sup>63</sup> and doing all we can to advance the Kingdom.<sup>64</sup>

## Next plans?

In early March of this year my Bible study group will finish its current in-depth two-year plan. If you want to read the Bible yourself, [here](#) is my latest general advice on that. If you want to join my little study group, [you're welcome to](#). (Maybe we'll move to [this new Signal group](#) after the break.)

I am tentatively planning to take a little time out to read the Apostolic Fathers again. I have read them twice but never terribly carefully. They were written between perhaps 60 A.D. and 160 A.D. I also want to read the Apocrypha, which I have never read before. (These books were mostly written in the intertestamental period, between approximately 400 B.C. and 100 A.D.; they are not considered canonical by either Protestants or Jews.) Together these texts are about 30% of the length of the Bible, so this will take about four months plus a little (for time to read introductions). Then I'll dive back into the Bible, of course. Again, this is still a tentative plan, so it might change.

Everybody should read the Bible daily, anyway.

I am also looking for philosophers and theologians to review *God Exists*, but be forewarned: it's weighing in at 550 pages and growing (or changing) steadily. As I said, it might end up being two volumes. Eventually I plan to convene some sort of philosophical and theological study group to help me go over supporting source material corresponding to various topics in the book (e.g., classic versions of the Argument from Contingency, the Problem of Evil, theories of divine justice, and whatnot). But I suspect that won't start for at least another year.

If you've made it this far, I'd be delighted to have your reaction—or perhaps your own testimony? Or objections or questions I can address?

## Footnotes

1. Mark 16:15.[↩]
2. Philosophers will recognize that this was a Cartesian approach, and indeed, I ended up writing my senior thesis in college on the methodology of Descartes.[↩]
3. This view is sometimes called *theological noncognitivism*. I still think there is something to this reasoning, though I no longer think the conclusion follows: of course we are capable of otherwise meaningful discourse with placeholders in it. Many religious thinkers, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Church, take a similar view with what they call *apophatic* theology, i.e., an emphasis on describing God in terms of what he is not, rather than what he is. But they are certainly willing to work within a framework saying *something, we know not what*, created the universe. Moreover, one can say that this gives sense to the notion of God being *holy*, a term that means, in its original sense, something entirely *other* and separate, due to moral perfection.[↩]
4. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).[↩]
5. All three are known for their work in philosophy of religion, but Alston is better known for his work in epistemology and philosophy of language; Plantinga, for metaphysics, modal logic, and epistemology; and Swinburne, metaphysics and epistemology. RIP, Alston. Plantinga and Swinburne are still alive and in their 90s. My thanks to these gentlemen.[↩]
6. The theory sometimes called *enlightened ethical egoism* says that what we ought to do is determined by what is in our own “enlightened” self-interest. The theory holds that we can explain ordinary moral obligations against injustice, and for honesty, roughly in terms of what we care about in our own lives.[↩]
7. Boghossian is now an enemy of “wokeness” and defends the expression of unpopular views on campus, but at the time I thought of him as being essentially a pushy wokester himself. He seems to have changed.[↩]
8. Just for example, one of the more hare-brained claims of the Quora atheists, common to atheists generally, is that “it’s impossible to prove a negative,” and hence impossible to argue that God does not exist. I proceeded to provide arguments with the conclusion, “God does not exist”—variants of the Problem of Evil and the positivist critique of the meaningfulness of “God”-talk—without claiming that I endorsed the arguments. I just wanted them to know that it was possible to make the arguments.[↩]
9. Daniel Dennett’s criticisms are more intelligent, but he has yet to publish a thoroughgoing takedown volume on theism or defense of skepticism; his critical views are scattered throughout various volumes. Michael Martin’s *Atheism: A Philosophical*

- Justification* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990) is an attempt at such a “systematic takedown” by a serious philosopher, but not particularly well known.[↩]
10. I wrote two long and very popular Twitter threads, one on “[elite pedophile rings](#)” and another on “[child sex trafficking—by elites](#).” See also this [list of famous pedophiles](#).[↩]
  11. The erstwhile Tecarta Bible app, now called the Life Bible app.[↩]
  12. A chronological approach seemed like the right way to go, so I used the “Every Word” plan.[↩]
  13. The relevant distinction here is between *natural theology*, which is the old-fashioned term for the theistic arguments in the philosophy of religion, and *revealed theology* or *revealed religion*, which is, basically, Scripture and any religious experiences there might be.[↩]
  14. I made light copyedits for clarity, not for doctrinal correctness.[↩]
  15. This impressed me deeply in no small part because I had just a few months before [written](#) that “The thing that has ultimate value, for anything that is alive, is life itself.”[↩]
  16. I can make it available to folks by email but I’m not really ready to publish it, if I ever will. It eventually grew to 23,700 words. But then, I guess that’s just half again as long as the present writing.[↩]
  17. My first attempt to explain why Jesus had to die on the cross for our sins is still here on this blog, and I still think it’s more or less right: “[An Explanation of Divine Sacrifice](#),” February 23, 2020, right around the time I admitted to myself that I believe in God.[↩]
  18. Matt 28:19.[↩]
  19. 1 Cor 13:12.[↩]
  20. John 15:26; Gal 4:6.[↩]
  21. John 1:14; Col 2:9; Luke 4:1.[↩]
  22. John 3:16; John 14:26.[↩]
  23. John 10:30.[↩]
  24. Gen 1:1; Heb 1:3.[↩]
  25. John 1:1-3; Heb 1:2-3.[↩]
  26. Gen 1:2, 8:1; John 14:16-17; Rom 8:11.[↩]

27. Gen 1:26-31; Gen 3:1-24; Rom 5:12-19[↩]
28. Ps 51:5; Rom 3:23; Eph 2:3[↩]
29. Deut 30:19; Prov 14:12; Rom 7:15-20[↩]
30. Isa 6:5; Rom 3:10-12; 1 John 1:8-10[↩]
31. Ps 8:3-6; John 3:16; 2 Pet 3:9[↩]
32. John 1:12-13; Rom 8:14-17; 1 John 3:1.[↩]
33. Isa 64:6; Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5[↩]
34. Rom 7:24-25.[↩]
35. Rom 6:23; Heb 9:27; 2 Thess 1:8-9[↩]
36. Matt 25:41-46; Rev 20:10-15[↩]
37. 2 Tim 3:16-17; Ps 119:160.[↩]
38. 1 Cor 4:6; Deut 4:2.[↩]
39. Gen 12:1-3, 26:4.[↩]
40. Deut 6:1-3.[↩]
41. Lev 4:20, 35.[↩]
42. Isa 1:11-17; Jer 7:21-26.[↩]
43. Isa 7:14; Joel 2:28-29.[↩]
44. Ezek 36:25-27; Jer 31:33-34.[↩]
45. Matt 1:23; John 10:30; Luke 4:18-19.[↩]
46. Matt 9:35; John 11:43-44.[↩]
47. Matt 4:17; Mark 1:15.[↩]
48. Rom 8:1-4; Heb 9:22; Lev 17:11.[↩]
49. John 15:13; Eph 5:2.[↩]
50. Heb 10:10-12; 1 John 2:2; Acts 3:19.[↩]
51. Matt 28:5-6; 1 Cor 15:3-4; Rom 6:9.[↩]
52. John 3:16; Rom 10:9-10; Heb 7:25.[↩]

53. Acts 2:41-42; Eph 2:19-22.[↩]
54. John 14:26; Acts 2:1-4; Rom 8:9.[↩]
55. Matt 4:17; Acts 3:19; 2 Cor 7:10.[↩]
56. Matt 28:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26.[↩]
57. Gal 3:28; Rev 7:9-10; John 14:6.[↩]
58. Gal 1:8; 1 Cor 1:10-13; Eph 5:23.[↩]
59. Mark 9:38-41; Rom 14:4-5; 2 Tim 2:19.[↩]
60. Acts 1:11; Rev 21:1-2.[↩]
61. Rev 21:4; 1 Cor 15:54-55.[↩]
62. Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17-18.[↩]
63. Matt 22:37-39; Titus 2:11-12; Matt 10:16.[↩]
64. Matt 6:33; Col 3:23-24.[↩]

How a Skeptical Philosopher Becomes a Christian, by Larry Sanger “Internet Knowledge Organizer.” Currently President of the Knowledge Standards Foundation, started Wikipedia and various other educational and reference sites. Ph.D., Philosophy, Ohio State, 2000.

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By Larry Sanger

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