

Something or Nothing

1 Peter 3:15

Anybody who feels – or ‘hears’ – a call to ministry can probably sum up their reason for saying ‘yes’ to that call in just a few words. In my experience, it’s not that complicated – a decision to enter ministry as a full time vocation is typically for a rather specific purpose. You don’t think about the vast scope of what is actually included in that ‘call’. You have no idea (probably a good thing) about bulletin preparation, and Ad Council meetings, budgets, fund raising and church dinners... you have no clue that you will be expected to have the right answers to an incredible array of questions – and at a moment’s notice. You just feel a burning desire to do some specific thing for God, and that one thing tends to become even *more* specific as your experience broadens.

For some, giving pastoral care to the hurting world is that one ‘thing’. For others, leading worship is the center of your call. For still others, establishing justice related ministries, or, spending time in study and prayer, seeking God and letting others share in your journey. Now, *all* of those things are part of the ‘call’ and if you have a difficulty in any of them, you should probably reconsider your vocational choice!

But still, I think there tends to be **one** thing that stands above the others; one thing that, when you’re doing it, you think to yourself, “*this* is why I went into the ministry”.

I do find that ‘all of the above’ have their own affirmations and rewards for me personally, and I feel privileged to do them. But also for me, that ‘one thing’ that stands out above the rest is also pretty clear. I entered ministry because of a deep passion – a *burning* is a good word – to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with people who haven’t heard. And as I gained more experience in the church, that call didn’t diminish, it deepened, and it became even *more* specific: now I realize, I want to share the Good News of Jesus with people whom the traditional Church has either neglected or hasn’t been able to reach.

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I.e., I want to make the Gospel accessible to ‘non-church’, ‘non-traditional’ people. To do this in a context of ministering to many other Christians in various levels of faith and understanding has been a challenge over the years (because I don’t want to neglect anyone!) but it’s no accident that we offer the variety of things that we do here. It’s not that I’m a dictator, but I don’t believe that God would put someone with a specific passion in a certain place and then not provide a congregation who will support that vision and actually carry it out. And you have!

As I shared with you on other occasions, in my formal preparation for ministry I gravitated to courses in the Philosophy department, (ending up with something like a double major in Bible and Philosophy) and particularly the branch of Philosophy called “Apologetics” because of what I hoped to learn that would enable me to better communicate the Christian faith to unbelievers, or the half-convinced. In the beginning, I had what I now consider to be a misdirected goal, of being able to provide such an air-tight case for Christ that no one would be able to resist my logic

Well, now I have come to realize a couple of things that have changed that priority!

1. I’m not that smart, and
2. Even if I were, logic is only a part of the ‘battle’, and maybe not even the biggest part!

So, I’ve been learning more and more about the importance of prayer in Evangelism, the part that servanthood plays; I’m learning about the place of one’s *character* in the evangelistic process (our walk defines our talk, which we’ll talk about in week 7 of this series)... all this, but nevertheless... my goal, my basic passion hasn’t changed. And neither has my love affair with apologetics.

As one who counts as mentors in the faith authors like C. S. Lewis, Alistair McGrath, Philip Yancey, and more recently, Dallas Willard (who is the chair of the philosophy dept. at USC), I take very seriously the admonition of Peter:

“If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way.” (1 Peter 3:15).

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Because of this, I think a lot about my hope in Christ, and I have had many conversations with people who have asked about my faith. I know the questions that I have wrestled with over the years – and some of these have become even tougher for me as time goes on, not easier! I've seen tragedies and triumphs, successes and failures, and I've seen many changes in the church over the 29 years of my ministry, which is in this period between 'eras' of Church history.

You may not think this is possible for a pastor, but my faith has been severely tested over that time. I have a contemplative personality, which means, I can't *help* but ask questions about the 'why's' of things, and examine the "bigger picture" type questions. I have to know how things fit together, and how my faith integrates with the reality that I perceive, and things I hear people talking about – (i.e., "What does faith say to *that*?"). My personal struggles form the basis for many a sermon that you've had to endure, because what I share with you from this vantage point is rarely theoretical – it is my life, my journey. If you find it helpful, it's likely because I have, as well.

But through it all, I've found that while my faith has changed over the years, it has also survived and it has grown. I find that the battles I choose to fight today are not those that would have chosen 20 years ago. My perspective on some issues has shifted, and refocused. But I do believe, as much as ever.

So I thought that I would like to share with you, over the course of the next 7 seven weeks, *my* reasons for the hope that is in me. "Why I Believe". As I wrote in my 'introduction (you can get a copy on the welcome center, or check out the bulletin board in the Narthex) this isn't an attempt to answer every question; and if I do this right, it should probably *raise* more questions than perhaps I will answer. If that's the case, then awesome! But this is about my faith, why *I* believe. You may have some different reasons, and hopefully, I'll help you think about that. My positions on some of these things may be challenging to you, and I have to also realize that they *may* even be upsetting. (I hope not!) But I share them humbly, and respectfully with you and hopefully, in the end, this will be encouraging, and ultimately helpful.

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There is a logical progression to this series.

Today we're going to talk a little bit about the starting point – and how doubt and faith tend to coexist in everyone. The point – I'll tell you now, in case you are starting to nod off – is that theism and atheism *both* are faith positions. It all starts with faith. My faith is in Theism (belief in one God who stands apart from Creation). The reason I believe this is that I think it makes sense, but mainly it's because I trust the Bible as God's Word.

So, we're going to spend two weeks talking about that – *why* do I trust the Bible? This is the crucial point of any Christian commitment. Do Christians have to commit intellectual suicide? (Hint: I think not!) So we'll talk about that for two weeks.

After that, I think we need to get honest and talk about some of the 'hard passages' in the Bible. What does it mean to say that the Bible is the Word of God when there is stuff in there like how much you are allowed to beat your slaves, prayers for the destruction of children, and so forth?

Next, we read all the time about 'conflicts' between the Bible and science... are they real? Can the two co-exist? (Here's another hint: Did you know that the percentage of professing believers among those working in the sciences, proportionally, has been *growing* in the last 20 years? Hmmm....).

After that we'll talk about the most frequently cited objection to the Christian message: i.e., the existence of suffering. How can there be suffering and evil in a world governed by a God who is supposedly 'good'? What does that mean?

We'll finish up with a message called "When Christians Go Wrong". I have to admit I stole/borrowed that title from Adam Hamilton, but it was too perfect not to. We need to be honest in admitting that what Karl Rahner said is probably true:

*The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and deny Him with their lifestyles is what an unbelieving world finds simply unbelievable.*¹

¹ Karl Rahner, quoted in the Wittenburg Door (June/July 1988). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 8

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We'll talk a little about that. Now, on the other hand, if we're going to admit that we can get it wrong (and we *have*), it is only fair to talk about the good that has happened through people who *got it right*. It is rather astounding, and no other group of people – of faith or any other connection – in history have done as much lasting good as the church.

And we'll end that message with what Adam Hamilton termed, “the compelling moral vision of Christianity”. The standard, the vision, of a life in Jesus Christ is a challenge that the world has never seen before or since. And it is truly a compelling and noble vision, to the point where I feel solidarity with many who have said something like this: “I'd rather stand with Christ and be proven wrong in the end, than to stand for something less and be proven right.”²

That's my plan, and it's a tall order... but I'm looking forward to these weeks. You know, we *never* take the summer off here! I've set myself a reading goal in all of this, because I want to share good resources with you and be fresh myself. So we'll see how that works out! Here we go...

The path to Christian faith, paradoxically, *begins* with faith. (Hebrews 11:6) “*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*” So the Scripture says, if you want to be a person of faith, you start with ... faith.

Back in those heady days of college philosophy (there's an image for you!) I remember reading all the 'classical arguments' for the existence of God. (As well as those of people who would 'refute' them.)

² This is a restatement Blaise Pascal's 'wager'

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The *Cosmological* Argument - everything has a cause; The *Teleological* Argument, (that a 'watch implies a watchmaker'), The *Moral* Argument – i.e., our sense of moral values points to the existence of a moral Creator, and many others... I found I resonated with some and was baffled by others (the *Ontological*) but none quite seemed to me to be 'irrefutable'. And that's what I wanted.

Surely, I thought, a God of reason should be able to be proven by reason. I remember reading a book by C. S. Lewis (Miracles), in which Lewis argues for the existence of 'something beyond a materialistic universe' by demonstrating how the very concept of communication requires it. In fact, he says, our language, our thoughts, emotions, goals, plans, love, pain – everything that makes us 'human' is mere illusion if there is not something 'outside of the system'. Otherwise, all that we think of as communication, as 'self' is in reality simply a meaningless cosmic accident.

I still think that that argument comes as close as human intellect will get to a 'proof' of the supernatural, but it falls far short of a belief in the Triune God. But it is a good starting place. So I thought. My college roommate's father was an intellectual agnostic, a very intelligent man. I gave him a copy of Lewis' Miracles to read. And he read it. I'd like to tell you that this was his first step toward belief, but that wasn't the case. At all.

He finished the book and summarily dismissed it, saying, "It was just playing with words." That was it – no more discussion! That was an eye opening moment for me. It was the beginning of my realization that logical arguments, and intellect, only had *something* to do with a person's spiritual journey... the real key to it all was our *will*. This man simply didn't *want* to believe. And unless he found a reason why he might eventually want to, (or perhaps discovered the reason why he was so *opposed to* the idea of the supernatural in the first place) he simply was not going to believe!

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Alister McGrath (who is president of the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics, at Oxford University in Great Britain) has written a number of books on Apologetics including the recent “Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith”, which I’ve just about finished.

In this book McGrath writes of the relationship between doubt and faith, which, he says, ‘is probably a permanent feature of the Christian life.’ He adds, “[Doubt] is like some kind of spiritual growing pain. Sometimes it recedes into the background; at other times it comes to the forefront, making its presence felt with a vengeance.”³

But he makes some important distinctions. Doubt, he says, is not the same thing as *skepticism* - which is a *decision* to doubt *everything* deliberately, as a matter of principle.

And doubt is also not *unbelief* – i.e., the *decision* not to have faith in God. *Unbelief is an act of will, rather than a difficulty in understanding.*⁴ I saw that for the first time in my old roommate’s father: his unbelief *was* an act of will. There would not be an argument or an action that would convince him to faith, unless his will changed (or *was* changed.) And I’ve seen it since.

I think this is what Jesus was talking about when, in the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus Jesus puts this conversation in the lips of the rich man and Father Abraham: (Luke 16)

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

In writing about doubt, McGrath points out that no matter where we start, no matter what foundation we decide to build our lives upon, we are going to begin with an act of faith. Because

³ “Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith”, Alistar McGrath, p. 14

⁴ Doubt...., p.13

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of our limited human minds there will always be *unproven* things... but that's not just true Theists, it is true for any 'foundation' we would choose.

“To believe in God demands an act of faith – as does the decision not to believe in him. Neither is based on absolute certainty, nor can it be. To accept Jesus demands a leap of faith – but so does the decision to reject him. To accept Christianity demands faith – and so does the decision to reject it. Both rest on faith, in that nobody can prove with absolute certainty that Jesus is the Son of God, the risen Savior of humanity – just as nobody can prove with absolute certainty that he is not. The decision, whatever it may be, rests on faith. There is an element of doubt in each case. Every attitude toward Jesus – except the decision not to have any attitude at all – rests on faith, not certainty. *Faith is not belief without proof but trust without reservation – trust in a God who has shown himself worthy of that trust.*⁵

In this statement, McGrath is saying what many have pointed out before him. The French Philosopher Blasé Pascal wrote a similar thing in the 1600's:

If I saw no signs of a divinity, I would fix myself in denial. If I saw everywhere the marks of a Creator, I would repose peacefully in faith. But seeing too much to deny Him, and too little to assure me, I am in a pitiful state, and I would wish a hundred times that if a God sustains nature it would reveal Him without ambiguity.

Let's be quite out front with this: Nobody can prove Christianity with total certainty. But that's not really a problem. Again, let me quote Alister McGrath once more:

*“The big questions concern the reliability of [Christianity's] historical foundations, its internal consistency, its rationality, its power to convert and its relevance to human existence. As C. S. Lewis stressed in Mere Christianity, Christianity has exceptionally fine credentials on all counts. Look into them. You can totally commit yourself to the Gospel in full confidence, as a powerful, credible and profoundly satisfying answer to the mystery of human existence. Faith is basically the resolve to live our lives on the assumption that certain things are true and trustworthy, in the confident assurance that they are true and trustworthy, and that one day we will know with absolute certainty that they are true and trustworthy.”*⁶

⁵ Doubt..., p.25

⁶ Doubt, p. 27

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And so, this summer we will take up C. S. Lewis' challenge to look into the 'credentials' of our faith – looking at the reliability of its historical foundations, its internal consistency, its rationality, its power to convert and its relevance to human existence.

It is my prayer that in this process we will all find a deeper reason to rest on the hope that is within us... that our foundations of faith would continue to grow stronger, wider, and deeper... until the day that faith becomes sight.

Amen!