

*The memoir below was sent to a collection of friends, mentors, and family in June 2022 – it describes my experience as a young adult struggling with the Evangelical Christian tradition I grew up in. After sending it via email, a number of people encouraged me to put it online, which is why you're seeing it here.*

*If you stumbled onto this memoir while browsing my website for academic purposes, it probably isn't for you; you're more than welcome to read it, but it is a personal account surrounding topics of religion, spirituality, philosophy, literature, sociology, and psychology – not cryptography.*

*For everyone who does decide to read on, I hope that something here might resonate with you regardless of your background.*

– Ryan

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Hi all! When I first got to college I tried to keep a habit of sending life updates every few months to spiritual mentors in my life. However – for reasons that will become clearer – I haven't written one for over two years. I figured it's about time I made up for that lost time, but this period has been significant enough that I wanted to share it with a wider audience.

I am well aware that it is a *lot*. Writing something of this size is a very me thing to do haha. I don't expect that anyone thinks I'm important enough to warrant this much reading; rather, I hope that my own story can be an encouragement for those of you with similar experiences, and, for others, provide insight into the mind of a young adult who struggles with the faith tradition they grew up in.

To be frank, many of you probably don't know me very well anymore. That knowing required me to be honest, and honesty necessitated significant chunks of time for explanation and vulnerability – time I didn't feel at liberty to ask for, and vulnerability that required much more trust than I possessed. Not to mention I've been physically distant from many of you for awhile now.

This is me being vulnerable and taking the time to explain myself.

Just know that if you're getting this memoir you're someone I deeply value :)

# Quick Life Update

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Outside of my spiritual life, the past few years have been a whirlwind.

Before graduating, I continued taking a wide variety of interesting classes, researching in cryptography, teaching Berkeley's computer security course, and singing in my weird a cappella group.

After graduating in winter of 2020, I moved to Oakland and began working for a startup spawned out of my undergraduate research lab. I'm currently annoying my housemates with persistent piano/guitar + questionable singing, cooking a lot, drinking indulgent amounts of coffee, partaking in many late-night wine conversations, traveling to some amazing places, backpacking whenever I get the chance, teaching for some volunteer orgs, running regularly, and going on plenty of beautiful hikes.

In a few days I'll be going on a two-week road/backpacking trip up through the Pacific Northwest and Canada with a group of friends! A month after that, I'll be moving across the country in order to start graduate school in cryptography :)

Overall, I couldn't ask to be in a better spot right now. I'm living in a wonderful location with an incredible job surrounded by precious friends and community. I'm a bit nervous about completely starting over again in a new place, but I already have a few, dear friends in that area, and the excitement I feel towards starting my PhD far outweighs any apprehension I might have.

# Spiritual Update

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Sorry this next part is so long. Part of me wanted to cut more, but I worried that something would be lost in the process.

Be aware that no-one proofread this so there will most certainly be plenty of typos, contradictions, unclear sentences, inconsistent tones etc. Oh well, I'm human.

I knew a time would come when I'd feel able to share my recent spiritual walk with others

in my life and writing it here is a way for me to structure my thoughts and save you from having to listen to me ramble for 2 hours (shoutout to Shannon for sitting through that haha).

It perhaps goes without saying that the word “Christian” is a bit ambiguous. Unless otherwise specified, I will loosely use this word to describe the Evangelical expression of Christianity I grew up with. In my mind, there are three main beliefs attached to this tradition: the need for people to be ‘born again’ as believers in Jesus Christ in order to be rescued from Hell, belief that the Bible is inerrant + infallible, and belief in substitutionary atonement i.e. Jesus died as a sacrifice to take on the punishment that mankind deserved due to sin.

Many of you receiving this memoir have wrestled with why young people are leaving church. At the very least, I hope that my story can help you all better understand and engage with the questions and practices my generation is wrestling with.

I suspect that many of you felt a moment of alarm while reading the last few paragraphs. As you continue to read, or even now, you may have thoughts like: “*What does he actually believe? Is he leaving the church? Is he no longer a Christian?*” **I would ask that you please consciously fight to push down such thoughts.**

*First of many tangents to explain myself...*

## Abstraction

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Consider a blindfolded woman being attacked on all sides by unknown adversaries (*I promise this is related - bear with me*). The blindfold greatly hinders this woman’s ability to learn about her environment or her foes.

She hears the wood creak under an assailant’s feet to her left – feels the breath of another to her immediate right. As her attackers interact with the surrounding environment, she can begin to build a mental map of the situation. However, her lack of sight more or less forces her to strictly *react* to her assailants’ movements.

Replay the same scenario but take off the blindfold: the woman instantly sees an exit in the distance and escapes.

*Information is power.* **The more we know, the better suited we are to make calculated decisions.**

A hot area of study in machine learning right now is that of [adversarial examples](#). What are these? Well let's say I'm inside an autonomously-driving Tesla. My Tesla (*these are nice words to say – sadly I am still driving a 2002 Honda Civic*) has been trained to recognize a stop sign and stop appropriately, however, what happens if someone sprayed graffiti over part of the stop sign? This new sign looks entirely different from the ones my Tesla has seen before, so, with some probability, it may completely fail to recognize it as one – and we have a car accident.

What's the problem here? Well my Tesla's machine learning model failed to *generalize*. In other words, its idea of a stop sign was too specific and it couldn't recognize a close variant.

Obviously, this is dangerous for the future of autonomous driving, but what in the world does machine learning robustness have to do with my point?

Machines suck at something that humans are masters of: *abstraction*. Abstraction is what allows us to see an unadulterated stop sign and one with graffiti on it and realize that they're the same thing. We come across a stop sign, and instead of saying "a stop sign is *this*," we define generic characteristics that define *what* a stop sign is (octagon, red, says STOP on it, etc.) and realize that "*this is a stop sign*" – notice the difference?

At its core, **abstraction is a mechanism to generalize knowledge**. In other words, it's a way that we can instantly generate information about something new. As humans, we heavily rely on abstraction, whether it be recognizing a stop sign or playing a friend's guitar.

However, abstraction doesn't truly give us information about *that* object, only about that *object*.

I may be able to pick up my friend's guitar and play it thanks to prior experience with my own guitar, but this is not because I'm aware of all the countless hours my friend's guitar has been played, the places it's been, and when those tiny scratches in the pick-guard were made. I'm able to play my friend's guitar because I know what a guitar looks like and what it does.

Now let's go back to the first example of the women being attacked. That example demonstrated the, perhaps common-sense, fact that information is paramount to survival. Knowledge empowers one to make calculated, proactive decisions. Consequently, our

brains hate uncertainty because it renders us helpless and unsure of how to act. As a result, **we naturally generalize the world around us to assert control over our environment**. By utilizing abstraction we combat uncertainty and allow ourselves to make calculated decisions.

However, that generalization unchecked causes us to lose sight of the uniqueness of *that* object and simply see it as an *object*. Furthermore, if our ideas of *object* are incorrect or too broad, then we may falsely project onto *that* object (*phew!! That's a bit to parse*).

It may not matter if I don't notice the scratches on my friend's guitar, but this becomes a much more serious issue when we start abstracting a fellow human.

Say I just met somebody: whether it be conscious or unconscious, my mind will begin doing something along the lines of:

*"Hmm this person is white and wearing a Stanford sweater. I'm going to go ahead and plop them into my 'intelligent' box, my 'arrogant' box, my 'rich' box, my ..."*

Oftentimes I may be completely right, other times completely wrong (though confirmation bias will probably still convince me I was right). Regardless, 8/10 times I have classified the person correctly to some granularity, and I'm now better informed on how to interact with them. Maybe I won't voice support for Trump if they're wearing a Berkeley sweater, maybe I won't say I'm gay if I see a cross around their necks.

For a real-life example that many of you have most likely had experience with, think about the Myers-Brigg or Enneagram tests. These tests reduce the entirety of humanity into a combination of 8/9 traits that describe our passions, insecurities, strengths, and weaknesses.

And don't get me wrong, I really really love these tests; they can provide beautiful insights into ourselves and others. But why do we like them so much? Perhaps because it helps us understand someone better, and even if it really doesn't, it gives us the illusion of understanding.

The Enneagram doesn't know Sasha is a [2](#) because she was bullied in highschool.

It doesn't know that Damien is a [3](#) because his parents only ever celebrated his academic achievements.

It doesn't know that Mason is an [8](#) because his parents were strict religious zealots.

So while abstraction is useful – ironically, even in the way I phrased the motivating paragraph for this tangent I put you in a box and assumed that you would have these reactions based on my experiences with Christian community – we should try our best to be cautious when boxing others up: we risk missing crucial aspects of them in the process.

Abstraction can also act as a defense mechanism. If you threaten my beliefs or ideas, I can avoid truly engaging with your ideas by making you the ‘other’. Once I have classified you as threatening my beliefs, I will subconsciously resist actually getting to know you. Anytime you tell me a story, instead of truly listening and seeking to understand you, I will scramble to think of which box to put it in so that I know how to respond.

So finally to my point: I will most likely say things and ask questions which challenge your own beliefs. I ask that, even through that, your reaction isn’t to place me into a box, it isn’t to figure out the best way to tell me why I’m wrong – I ask that you just listen. Trust me, I am more than happy to listen to every reason why you believe I’m wrong. But the only way that conversation will be productive is if you understand me first.

I started writing this memoir over two years ago and, for the sake of brevity, have decided to only focus on talking about things prior to August 2020. A *lot* has changed since then, but these years were the most relevant to you all, and if I didn’t set some sort of cutoff I don’t know if I ever would have finished this.

Many of you have probably already gone through years of similar experiences to what I’ll describe here; I would love to hear thoughts from each and everyone of you, but I’d just ask that you do that after truly reading. I’m tired of other Christians proving their faith to themselves instead of engaging with me as a human being.

Instead of focusing on where I ended up, walk with me on the journey through *why* I made that transition :)

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(... Ok, **phew** back now)

In the last two years, I have interacted with a surprising number of people sharing remarkably similar stories to my own. So while I don’t have the audacity to claim that my story is *the* common narrative (I would highly doubt that it is – I’m pretty weird), I can say with reasonable confidence that aspects of my story are *a* common narrative.

# A Thank You

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A part of me would like to claim that I made a pretty decent Christian kid growing up. A legitimate feeling of deep connection with God naturally manifested itself in a passion for learning more about our Creator, a joy in debating the mysteries He left us with, and a love for aggressively hitting the piano keys and singing my heart out in worship.

But, if I'm being honest, I can take little responsibility for any of the wonder and good I found in Christianity. Obviously, much of that responsibility falls to God, but, moreover, I was raised in a community that encouraged, refined, and amplified spiritual living as an integral part of life.

Mom and Dad, you were radiant examples of truly living what you believe, and took every opportunity to teach and challenge me. The community you brought me into – many of you all – loved and cared for me in meaningful and deep ways. Not only that, but Grace Church valued and fostered critical thinking as an essential aspect of life and faith – I can't overstate how much of an immense privilege this was for me. Whether it be Tab delivering an seemingly harsh message in the most compassionate manner, or Marshall starting youth group with a detailed, 20-paged outline, you all taught me how to love and how to think.

After leaving San Diego and coming to Berkeley, I was blessed to find a community just as rich and thoughtful in Solano Community Church. You all, and especially your home group, Jason and Mel, were a consistent source of stability and comfort. Words cannot describe the care and respect I have for all of you.

*All this to say, my spiritual communities have been filled with remarkable thinkers and phenomenal role models.*

I can't even begin to thank you for all the ways you've poured into me. You helped shape many of my fundamental aspects, and I would be distraught if I started this out with anything other than expressing my appreciation.

Please don't mistake my intentions or forget the love I have for you all. Any critique I make comes from a place of legitimate hurt or conviction – not any desire to put you down.

# Religion meet Cynicism

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My siblings and I are all pretty cynical. I'm not sure exactly why we all have this in common – it's certainly not a trait our parents possess – but I'll just go ahead and blame Carissa for somehow catching it and passing it to the rest of us (you're welcome Carissa). Regardless, I've struggled with it for a large chunk of my life, especially in the context of religion.

*Cynicism is complicated:* it's easy to figure out what bothers you but not *why* it bothers you. It manifests itself as anger, frustration, and scorn in reaction to something, but what does it inherently stem from? Someday I want to research the actual psychology behind it, but for now my best guess is that it's a defense mechanism for an underlying insecurity.

As such, I like to abstract my own cynicism into different categories (or flavors cause it sounds cooler haha) based on the underlying insecurity. This abstraction helps me organize my thoughts, and its structure reminds me that, even if my insecurities are valid responses to outward forces, I have control over the associated negative emotions.

## **Flavor 1: I'm embarrassed by my religion**

My first taste of cynicism started out small: inwardly sighing at someone's constant use of Christian-ese, rolling my eyes when the grocery store having *just* enough blueberries was definitely a sign of God's providence, or grimacing when a difficult time brought out the usually-unhelpful phrase "God is in control".

### **All of this seemed simplistic.**

*"You've used that phrase a thousand times, does it even have meaning to you anymore? Or is it just a filler that you use because you don't have anything meaningful to say?"*

*"Good to know you've reduced God to a personal servant"*

*"Just like during Auschwitz huh?"*

These encounters made me embarrassed to be Christian. I would put myself in the shoes of an outsider, and think of how naive the Christian faith must seem, and by association, my own faith. It was purely a pride thing – I recognized that. But that



realization never helped rid me of the grimace. I didn't have any problems with Christianity itself, just how others practiced it.

Ironically, I would wager that the Christian communities I've been a part of are far less vulnerable to this flavor compared to a majority in the US. Regardless, it initially never went beyond slight annoyance, but began to get worse as I went on to college.

## **Flavor 2: Why don't I get along with you?**

My second taste had also been ever-present during my high school years, but in much subtler ways.

Growing up, church relationships were generally pretty shallow. Outside of a rare few friends, I never felt like I could truly click with the other kids, and after awhile stopped trying to. Thankfully, my friend groups outside of church (still predominantly Christian) were stable enough that it didn't really matter.

Once I got to college, I sought out Christian community, but most of the people I met were similar to the people I had felt different from back home. I tried to stick with it – I became fairly involved with one Christian community for almost a year – but the relationships always felt shallow. I continued to bounce between multiple groups but never felt fully comfortable in those spaces.

While this was all happening, there were plenty of people outside of Christianity I was meeting and becoming great friends with. This annoyed me to no end as I deeply desired spiritual support and connection, but found that I only got along with non-Christians. I did an experiment for a few months (this is how desperate I was) where I kept track of every new person I met, how my interactions with them were going, whether I think we clicked well, etc. and found that my rate of getting along with Christians was 8% compared to 70% for non-Christians. While such an experiment is bound to be incredibly biased, the numbers still shocked me.

I've talked with some of you about this before; I've read [Bonhoeffer's book](#) on Christian community; I agree that a beautiful aspect of Christianity is that community bonded together under common belief does not necessitate members to be similar or share other interests. As beautiful as that idealism may be, in my experience the reality is that Christian community works by homogenizing, not through a coexisting of different cultures. And for whatever reason, I did *not* fit into whatever Christian culture was.

Failure to fit in grew into insecurity: “*The common thread here is me. What am I doing wrong? What’s wrong with me?*” Insecurity led me to act differently in a vane effort to fit in. In the end, I simply became bitter.

Again, there have always been exceptions to this. Even now, I have some wonderful relationships with Christians. But those exceptions are few and scattered.

There are many hypotheses I’ve considered to explain my experience, but none of them are completely satisfactory. I think the underlying dynamics are too complex to fully articulate.

### **Flavor 3: Why is my faith different?**

In high school, church/youth group/home group was generally a rich time for me. I was finally able to understand and reason about my faith in meaningful ways: whether it was discussing more complex theological topics, our purpose in life, or how we should live out our faith in a secular world, the questions were interesting, relevant, and new. We carefully analyzed parts of the Bible, finding small nuggets of wisdom and pulling out the common themes that ran through its entirety.

But after a few years, much of that novelty wore off. It wasn’t that I stopped caring about those things, but I wanted to learn more: what I had learned had simply produced *more* questions and the conversations never seemed to move very far past where they started. Church sermons felt like brief rehashes over the same few themes, and Bible studies felt like people just recapping basic Christian ideas to each other.

Those feelings of being embarrassed by my religion and not fitting in were compounded by a desire to further understand my faith, but not seeing a way to do it. I felt isolated in my curiosity, that isolation made me feel insecure, and that insecurity produced cynicism.

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That’s my best attempt at describing a few ways I’ve best understood the cynicism in my life. Topics like these are difficult for me to fully fit into words, but hopefully this is enough to understand me moving forward.

Regardless, I stuck with going to church because Christianity still gave me a meaning-filled way to understand the world around me and a rich spiritual community to take part

in.

## Worldview meet Doubt

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In high school, I never really doubted my faith: I had good evidence for what I believed to be true, it accurately described the world around me, and it was a hopeful message that gave me purpose. I remember growing up, hearing about others who seriously doubted their faith and the existence of God in hard times, and I legitimately could not imagine that ever happening to myself; God simply seemed too real.

While my cynicism produced skepticism towards Christians, it never made me skeptical of Christianity, only the stereotypical Evangelical expression of it. However, this began to change once I left for college.

As mentioned before, around 80% of my friends at college weren't Christian. While this didn't affect the way I lived in any significant manner, it challenged my worldview in an entirely new way. I learned that the simple abstractions I had internalized about those outside my own religious/socioeconomic/political/cultural/philosophical/etc. context were nothing but caricatures that came crumbling down as I met and interacted with more and more of the 'other'.

As an Evangelical Christian, I allegedly had some handle on Absolute Truth. The beliefs I held and the lifestyle I strived to follow were supposed to be close, within some epsilon, to what God intended for humanity. But as my generalizations about other people began to fall short, so did my reasoning for why their opinions, beliefs, and ways of life were *wrong*.

It started to feel more and more like I was fitting the world to my beliefs instead of having my beliefs describe the world around me.

*Do I really have this right?*

## Spring 2019

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By my sophomore spring of college, I had stopped pouring energy into trying to find

Christian peers even though I still attended church and home-group. To be clear, I considered many of the people in these communities to be dear, valued friends, but their friendships (generally speaking) never developed to the point where we would regularly interact outside of a spiritual context.

During this time, I ended up meeting a girl – I'll call her Ray. We were project partners in an Operating Systems class (destined for love), and eventually started dating. Ray was graduating at the end of summer, but we agreed to try things out for a few months and maybe attempt long-distance if things were going well – though we both doubted we wanted to do that.

While setting an expected break-up date probably seems strange to most people, I found it incredibly reassuring for the simple reason that Ray wasn't a Christian. As many of you know, Christian culture generally disapproves of being "unequally yoked" (2 Corinthians 6:14) with a non-Christian, and to some extent I agreed with the sentiment: I wanted a long-term partner to share my beliefs. Having this set date allowed me to enjoy a few months with someone I deeply cared about without worrying about a long-term commitment I didn't want to make (and Ray felt the same way for different reasons). We grew increasingly closer and, as one might expect, eventually the relationship became sexual.

## Summer 2019

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All my life, I had witnessed a culture of shame around dating non-Christians and premarital sex. However, I had never fully realized the magnitude of that shame until I suddenly stood in its path. As a defense mechanism, I continued to isolate myself. For the first time in my life, missing church became a common occurrence; lying to people and feeling insecure every time I skipped communion grew taxing; my cynicism became louder and louder; my spiritual relationships felt increasingly unauthentic. The days I would attend church often felt empty and shame-ridden.

Ironically, I felt very little guilt. My beliefs told me what I was doing was wrong, but there was no real conviction behind it. This brought up probably my first tinge of real doubt: *"If this is true, and the Holy Spirit is in me, shouldn't I feel guilt for this?"*

I remember spending nights praying, *"If this is really wrong, then please convict me"*. I had plenty of verses: Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27, John 16:7-13, Corinthians 2:9-11,

Romans 8:26, and John 14:16 – verses that told me the Holy Spirit would be with me and convict me of sin. Maybe I wasn't truly open to the idea of it being wrong – perhaps I was just too stubborn or enjoyed it too much – but looking back I can't really say that and be honest with myself. For whatever reason, I could not authentically feel like what I was doing was wrong regardless of how intellectually convinced I was of the fact.

At the end of summer, Ray graduated and we decided to end things. After taking a few months break from talking, we are now back to being good friends: we video-call and hang out fairly often.

My whole life I had been taught that marriage was a bed-rock of the Christian faith, and that premarital sex fundamentally violated that. Yet breaking that ethic had led me to experience an incredibly sweet time rich with wonderful memories and producing few negative feelings at the end of it for either party. I was well aware that anecdotal experience did not govern morality and perhaps the consequences would be felt later, but the sharp contrast between how antagonized the action was, and how beautiful the reality had been for me came as a shock.

But more fundamentally, the lack of guilt on such a fundamental Christian conviction stirred up a lot of confusion.

## Fall 2019

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Before school started, I decided to visit a friend in Dallas, who had always been one of the few Christian friends I truly vibed with. The small vacation was incredibly refreshing: it was the first time in a *while* that I felt like I could be honest with another Christian. Additionally, it was the first time in months that I had had any rebuttal against the constant narrative in my head that my failure to find Christian friends was strictly a *me* problem. This trip reminded me that, while I definitely had things I needed to work on, the spiritual peers I desired did exist and I wasn't simply pushing away anything that had to do with Christianity.

Sadly, that trip quickly came to a close and Fall would go on to be the darkest time of my life. The details aren't relevant, but I was left feeling valueless, friendless, and spiritually desolate. I drowned myself in work, only to leave my emotions piled up.

A knot began to form in my stomach. A weight on my soul. I didn't know what it was or

what had caused it, but my days were permeated by this ensuing sense of unease.

Was it my lack of community? The emotional weight of months of depression? The feeling of shame? Something else?

I had no idea.

In a vane attempt to regain normalcy I started attending church consistently again, but that simply made things worse. Most services would end with me leaving immediately, often in tears, too emotionally drained to attempt small talk with people, and my cynicism had gotten to the point where it was hard to get anything out of the sermons.

I tried opening up to fellow Christians about my struggles a few times, but those interactions generally went terribly (I'll talk more about it later). In hindsight many of those moments of vulnerability were probably at the wrong time, with the wrong people, and with unrealistic expectations. Regardless, having multiple, significant moments of vulnerability be swept under the rug by the same people I desperately desired connection with was incredibly painful; and I would even go as far as to describe it as emotionally scarring.

Probably one of the few positives of that time is I, ironically, agreed to help out planning events for the church's college ministry. It was a vane effort to get some community and still feel connected to the spirituality I knew – and it kind of worked! Through that time I ended up getting closer to a few wonderful Christians whom I really appreciate in my life.

## **Searching for Sunday**

Right before my visit to Dallas a dear friend of mine recommended a book to me called *Searching For Sunday* by Rachel Held Evans. I wasn't sure what to expect, but a few pages in I found myself so deeply enraptured that I finished the entire thing in that single plane ride.

The book is Rachel's autobiography, documenting her religious upbringing in the Bible Belt, fall away from the church, and eventual return. For many, the book may not read as incredibly profound. Indeed, I had a few older role models – comfortably embedded in the church – who read it, and their initial reaction was quite negative. I, however, was struck by the authenticity of the text and how similar its wrestling was to my own. After months upon months of feeling *alone*, reading the similar experience of another human being served as a phenomenal encouragement. Rachel's eloquent writing gave words to

pent-up emotions that I had thus far been unable to articulate.

Needless to say, this book served as a catalyst that helped me finally sit with, and better understand, my cynicism. It gave me a renewed appreciation for the church and all of the good that it does while simultaneously providing greater awareness of its harms. Additionally, it planted a few seeds of doubt which began to shape the next few months of my spiritual journey.

## **Oh no, it's the progressives!!**

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*As we start getting into actual theological issues, please give me grace in my explanations. I am by no means anywhere close to an expert on these topics, and am not trying to make convincing arguments – the purpose of this is simply to describe how these topics played a role in my own narrative.*

*I'm going to be brief at times and purposely vague about where I'm at now. This is partially because this memoir is already way too long, partially because my own beliefs have changed a lot even since writing this, but primarily because I hope that – if anything – this memoir can spark contemplation. I'd rather leave you pondering a question, then give you an easy target to agree/disagree with and stop the conversation there.*

*Also a reminder that when I use the term Christian I am specifically referring to Evangelical Christianity since this is what I grew up with.*

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One thing that struck me about Rachel's writing, was how genuinely she seemed to care for Jesus and the (inspired/inerrant) Bible, while also strongly supporting egalitarian theology and LGBTQ affirmation in the church. I thought the two were incompatible, that supporting either issue required 'throwing away' the Bible. Rachel's position made me curious.

Even though I considered these topics straightforward theologically, whenever I thought about them the knot in my stomach grew especially tight. Eventually, the unease and curiosity got the best of me, and I couldn't help but re-examine my own doctrine.

## **Egalitarianism**

I'll let my friends at Wikipedia briefly summarize this issue for those unfamiliar:

**Complementarianism** is a Christian theological view that men and women have different but *complementary* roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious leadership ... The main contrasting viewpoint is **egalitarianism**, which maintains that positions of authority and responsibility in marriage and religion should be equally available to females as well as male.

So essentially gender roles. There is much debate over specific applications within these doctrines, but a straightforward reading of many verses in the Bible will likely lead one into the complementary camp. For example, consider:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Ephesians 5:22-25 (KJV)

or

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

1 Timothy 2:12 (KJV)

I did not understand how you could read those verses (and many others), and hold an egalitarian opinion. Regardless, something seemed *wrong*: the complementary doctrine didn't seem to reflect the world I observed. I knew brilliant thinkers and preachers who were women, empathetic men who excelled at supporting rather than leading, and dozens of examples of individuals who defied gender norms.

Technically, all these things *could* work within a complementary worldview, but reconciling the two felt like trying to stuff a sleeping bag back into its case: no matter how hard I tried, there was always just a little bit that refused to fit. Regardless, as frustrating as it might be, I couldn't be intellectually honest with myself and believe otherwise.

However, upon researching the topic further, I became rather surprised. I started with 1 Timothy 2:12 and, without going into details, came to an intellectually honest opinion that the verse had been rather grossly mistranslated (far from complete, but for those



interested [here](#) is a light reading, and [here](#) + [here](#) are two more in-depth arguments).

Of course, many people motivate their translation of the above verse through more overarching themes of complementarianism in the Bible. As I continued to explore arguments against these themes for the first time, I was repeatedly surprised by how rational I found them to be. For those interested I would summarize many of the egalitarian arguments as giving more weight to the cultural context when interpreting passages:

*In Ephesians 5:22-25 is Paul saying that wives **should** submit to their husbands? Or is he saying that, in the given context of an extremely patriarchal society, both partners **should** carry out their societal roles (ie. leading and submitting) in a way that mimics the church and Christ?*

That's all I will say on the topic for now – I will come back to it a few times in future sections. For myself, this period was significant for a few reasons:

- It was the first time I had challenged a very fundamental aspect of the theology I grew up with
- That challenging had been prompted due to my contradictory *lived experience*
- I found many commentaries on 1 Timothy 2:12 rather sickening in how poorly they treated the text, especially when considering the effect these commentaries had had on women for thousands of years. While 1 Timothy 2:12 is one of the most highly debated verses in the whole Bible, all of this still sparked the question: *what else was wrong here?*

## **Sexuality**

*In this next section, when I mention the LGBTQ community/queerness I am only going to be referring to topics of sexuality and not gender identity. I originally had way-too-many pages on the latter, but, technically, it was out of order in this narrative and got too into-the-weeds for what I'm trying to do here.*

Growing up, only a few of my friends were part of the LGBTQ community (that I knew of: a surprising number who are still in the closet have since privately come out to me). Getting out of the house changed that a bit. Two of my closest friends at Cal were gay. Ray was bi. In total, I estimated around 20% of my college friends were queer.

Going into college I unequivocally held the standard Christian opinion: homosexuality was a sin. The Bible appeared to be fairly cut-and-dry on the issue. Personally, this belief

didn't have much of a (conscious) impact on how I interacted with people: everyone sins and this was just one example of that. I was legitimately excited to learn more about this community of people whom I really didn't understand.

However, if I'm being honest, I was not at all prepared for the emotional anguish that would come through interacting with individuals in these communities.

The vast majority of my queer friends had stories of families disowning them, churches excommunicating them, parents emotionally manipulating and shaming them, and entire communities attacking them for simply being honest about what they felt. It was indescribably painful to hear the horrific emotional abuse that happened almost entirely at the hands of Christians. It was terribly disassociating to be so close, love these people so much, and know that knowledge of your own beliefs would bring them immense pain.

I can distinctly remember three separate occasions my freshman year when first introducing myself to someone in the LGBTQ community I mentioned going to church and immediately their face flinched and they became visibly distressed.

I empathized with my friends genuinely, but underneath the surface there always existed a defense mechanism that would justify the situation, constantly telling myself that the Christian beliefs weren't the issue, it was just the mistaken ways others were choosing to act on those beliefs. Yet as the stories piled on, and I became acutely aware of just how widespread this treatment was, it was hard not to say "*something fundamental is wrong here*". Perhaps that fundamental wrongdoing was how Christians treated sin, perhaps it was how we understood sexuality, or perhaps our doctrine was wrong.

And when I thought about the Christian idea of sin and how it realized itself in the world, something didn't make sense. I understood sin as inherently being separation from God. At its core, a *corruption* of something good. Sin was selfish, sin was never satisfied, sin was destructive. But none of those things seemed to characterize queerness. I witnessed gay individuals falling in love, committing to partners, and going on to have happy relationships: where was the selfishness, the greediness, the destructiveness?

But more fundamentally, the implications of such doctrine were immense: avoiding this sin did not simply require *regulating* a desire, but completely *denying* a desire.

I could enjoy food without being a glutton, save money without being greedy, and have sex without being an adulterer, but the gay individual had no moral way to satisfy their sexual desires. In other words, sex, the thing which Christians touted as being this unique

and wonderful gift from God to experience intimacy, was completely unavailable for the gay Christian. The only healthy expression of their sexuality was to suppress it.

What other sin behaved like that? What other sin completely removed an individual's ability to enjoy such a significant gift from God?

As if the extreme requirements from such a doctrine weren't enough, the treatment of this sin also seemed unique in its extremity. I had witnessed lying, gossiping, cheating, divorce, etc. all be quickly forgiven within the church, but Christians seemed to have a visceral and unforgiving attitude towards queerness.

Even in churches like my own, where the stance towards gay individuals was one (theoretically) led with love, the church still seemed hyper-focused on these individuals' sexuality to the expense of everything else in their spiritual lives. A few gay friends of mine who stayed in church often complained about how their mentors seemed unable to move past their sexuality: *"So often I feel reduced to just 'a person struggling with homosexuality'. It can be difficult to talk about other things I'm working through because they simply see it as being a 'bigger' issue... it's honestly incredibly dehumanizing."* And, mind you, this was by far the *best* treatment of any queer individuals I knew in a non-affirming church. It got far worse very quickly.

With no other sin did the idea of grace seem so foreign.

Furthermore, this belief impacted an *enormous* number of people. Remember how I guesstimated that around 20% of my friends in college were queer? Well, that number appears to be spot on: [recent studies](#) report that 7% of US adults self-identify as LGBTQ – among adults my age, that number is around 21% or **more than one in 5**.

Usually the response I received to these questions was something like: "well we are not our sexuality", "romantic intimacy is not the only form of intimacy", "there is so much more to life than sex", etc. While I agree with all those statements, they do nothing to address the core questions here: all they do is minimize the struggle that queer Christians experience. It would be ridiculous to claim that sexuality is not a significant part of most people's lives. It deeply impacts how we interact with those around us and is a critical aspect of many of the most intimate and meaningful relationships in our lives. Consequently, a belief which completely neuters an individual's sexuality should not be taken lightly.

None of these musings formulate an argument or a reason to change theological beliefs.

But these questions were the catalysts that motivated me to search for a deeper understanding of an issue that, honestly, I knew very little about outside of a few verses.

Ask yourself, how would you respond to all of this? Do you agree that the church's theology on homosexuality is unique compared to other sins? If so, do you see that as a concern? If not, what other sin behaves in the same manner? Regardless, has your own battle with sin ever required a similar amount of sacrifice as to what the church requires of queer individuals? Could you imagine a reality where you had no hope for romantic or sexual intimacy? Why do you think Christians react so harshly to this sin compared to others?

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I battled emotionally with this one for months before I built up the courage to really jump into the details. In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel briefly mentions Matthew Vine, an advocate for gay rights in the church. Funnily enough, I had already had past exposure to him as we had briefly summarized, and refuted, his writings during a youth group meeting in high school. I decided to read his most popular work, [God and the Gay Christian](#), for my own and see what I thought.

Vine expresses the same motivating concerns I described above, as well as a few others, and goes on to compile a number of popular arguments made by LGBTQ-affirming theologians: mainly focusing on claimed mis-translations of specific words. It's a great starting point for understanding an affirming Christian view, but its short size forces it to make several lofty assumptions (e.g. you're an egalitarian). That being said, if you really have no idea how someone could hold the Bible as their highest authority and simultaneously affirm gay Christians then I would say it's an illustrating read – just be aware that for many of you the book will be starting from a different set of theological assumptions. For completeness, [here](#) is a solid response to the book I found by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS).

Anyways, I walked away from Vine's book and the SBTS response intellectually unconvinced in either direction, but acutely aware that things were not as cut-and-dry as I had previously thought them to be. Beneath the surface of this topic lurked questions regarding gender, marriage, sexual ethics, and Biblical interpretation: questions I had to answer to come to any sort of meaningful opinion.

So, I did not simply come to a conclusion after a few weeks of study. No, this question was at the back of my head for months as I re-examined a number of things, many of

which we'll touch on later in this memoir. But, most importantly, it was yet another fracture between my theology and the world I observed.

## Winter 2019

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By winter I was in a strange position. To some extent I felt more at ease: I had taken a few big theological issues, battled with them, and come out with some opinions changed and others in a much healthier state of honest, intellectual uncertainty. I knew I had a lot more work to do, but I thought that maybe now I could finally start healing from the months of isolation, confusion, and cynicism.

The knot in my stomach hadn't left, but I figured this was just a remnant of my struggles which needed time to heal. After taking a few-weeks off from church during winter break to process everything, I decided to try again.

Before heading back to school, I had talked about much of this with a good friend who was from a similar faith community. They recommended that I listen to something many of their friends in similar situations to mine had found helpful: the Liturgists Podcast.

## Deconstruction

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The Liturgists Podcast was started out by Michael Gungor and Mike McHargue, two individuals who grew up in traditional Christian communities, rejected that tradition and became self-proclaimed atheists, only to have mystical experiences and slowly make their way back to spiritual practice. Mike has since moved on from the podcast for health reasons, and there are a few new hosts, William Matthew, who was a well-known singer for Bethel Music (if you listen to Christian radio you've probably heard him a lot) and currently does advocacy work, and Hillary McBride who is a trauma psychologist.

You might already be familiar with Michael, as he and his wife Lisa led the very successful Christian band Gungor (which was my favorite Christian music group even before listening to the podcast) until his beliefs got the group ostracized from the Christian music community.

So what is the podcast? Their website describes themselves as “*a genre-bending, chart-topping exploration of the most interesting and pressing topics of our time through the lenses of art, science, and faith.*” but I would simply describe it as a podcast for **deconstruction**. In a spiritual context and for myself, I would define deconstruction as re-examining my beliefs and the assumptions that underlie them, ascertaining exactly what I do, and don’t, believe, and analyzing all the subtle ways these beliefs have shaped me (*note that I’m referring to the first season or so of the podcast, the latter seasons branched off into different directions*).

Of course, I didn’t even know that word existed when I first started listening to the podcast (in recent years it’s seemingly become much more common).

The episodes usually consisted of a simple conversation. The hosts would take a relevant topic and attempt to tear apart the cultural narratives (whether that be secular or religious) and teachings surrounding it.

At first, I simply found the podcast to be comforting. I didn’t agree with many of the expressed viewpoints – even the hosts oftentimes disagreed amongst themselves – but the incredibly deep level of questioning, willingness to engage with alternate ideas, and fresh perspectives each host contributed felt like a spiritual space that I had been longing for for years.

I especially appreciated the podcast’s frequent use of advances in psychology, biology, sociology, etc. to inform and challenge opinions. In my experience, religion tended to only engage with science as an anecdotal yes-man; seeing how our understandings of the world and human nature could also *challenge* and *inform* theology was exciting and refreshing.

The podcast didn’t deal with constructing any sort of particularly new doctrine – it was very much focused on deconstructing – and I would come away with “homework” after every episode.

As I continued listening, something unexpected started occurring. I thought in having wrestled with my main spiritual gripes and finding new forms of spiritual inquiry that the knot in my stomach would begin to go away; but the exact opposite happened.

I had never questioned or explored my beliefs at such a fundamental level. As I personally considered the questions being asked, my answers began to feel increasingly less satisfying. When I attempted to justify why some of these alternate viewpoints felt wrong, my reasoning failed me. I slowly began to realize just how large my faith

assumptions really were and could find little reasonable justification for many of them.

The knot grew tighter and tighter.

For awhile, I still clung to the belief that my unease centered around second-order theology, that I simply needed more time to think or more time in community to feel better. But I slowly began to realize that this explanation was false and really just a defense mechanism to hide myself from what was really going on.

The podcast had turned on a flashlight to reveal a vast labyrinth of questions I had suppressed, buried, and run from because, in the past, I had felt alone in my curiosity and the thought of losing my faith community terrified me. Finding a space where those questions were allowed, accepted, and encouraged had removed the need for my subconscious to shelter me.

I could finally admit: *I'm not sure I believe any of this.*

The knot disappeared.

And doubt came crashing in.

Questioning doctrine became questioning *Christianity*.

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Before I continue it's important to be honest about my motivations. They've been implicit in what I've discussed so far, but I would like to make sure they're explicit.

*(Also another reminder that I'm using Christian ≈ Evangelical here)*

As much as my intellectual pride would like to say otherwise, I would not have gone on such an intense re-examining of my own beliefs if they simply didn't make sense from an intellectual perspective. It might have bothered me, but I probably would have simply said something along the lines of "we simply can't fully understand God" or "I'll trust God with this issue" or "I shouldn't get let the mysteries of Christianity keep me from the basics" or one of the many different cop-outs Christians pull when their faith seems inconsistent, and gone on with my day.

But no, the fact of the matter is my deconstruction was not motivated by intellectual reasons. It was motivated by the fact that: *my lived experience was inconsistent with the Christian worldview I held.*

I tried to tell myself the problem was with others or with my understanding of my own beliefs, but in my gut I couldn't get past the feeling that, fundamentally, my worldview did not accurately describe the world around me and that the lifestyle it required was limiting, unhealthy, and damaging to myself and others. Motivated by that dissonance, I began an intellectual deep-dive into my own beliefs – re-affirming some and rebutting others.

That would be a very succinct summary of this entire memoir, the rest of it simply goes into more specifics.

## God

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While Christianity could be described in many ways, I would argue that it (alongside many other religions) essentially boils down to developing a specific understanding of God (whatever that word may mean). Our understanding of God gives us answers to *where* we came from, *who* we are, *what* we are capable of, *why* we exist, and *where* we are going.

Christians believe in the God described in the Bible and passed down through written and oral tradition: that He made us, gave us a purpose on Earth, and promises an afterlife with Him.

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*"How is your relationship with God?"*

*"How would you describe God?"*

*"God cares about you"*

*"I have conversations with God throughout the day"*

*"Jesus is a close friend of mine"*

Growing up steeped in Christian-ese, these were all common questions I received and phrases I heard people say. At the time, they all seemed to make sense: from a young age I was taught how to pray, how to understand God, and I sincerely *felt* that I had a personal relationship with Him. However, as I began re-examining many aspects of my faith, the meaning behind these questions/phrases became less clear.

Many of the friends who I confided my doubts in began to ask, "but how is your relationship with God?", and I realized I had no good way to answer that question. Since there's no real way (as far as I'm aware), to tell that you are "close to God," it seems that



the phrase is better translated as “Do you *feel* close to God?”

And again, what does that even mean?

In the manner I grew up, this feeling usually followed from the necessary condition of living under a Christian ethic. I felt close to God when I was living righteously (e.g. not masturbating, reading my Bible, doing service work etc.) and far from God in the converse.

And this makes sense, right? If God wants us to live a certain way, then a necessary condition to a healthy relationship would be respecting that desire. Of course there's the whole issue of *trying* to live under this Christian ethic, failing, and feeling far from God as a result... but that's a whole other topic.

However, at a more fundamental level, when I think back, very little of my feeling close to God had any of the characteristics of a 'relationship'. I've always been fond of the phrase, “*Any healthy relationship needs to flow both ways,*” but God never talked back to me when I prayed. Perhaps that moment of peace or the random coincidence that answered a prayer was part of the conversation?

Or maybe I just had confirmation bias.

Anyways, I'd encourage you to really sit with these questions: would you say you feel close to God? When do you feel that way? What does it feel like? How does it compare to other relationships in your life?

Now ask yourself this question: if the God you perceive in the Bible, the God you pray to, the God whose commands you believe you follow, *didn't exist*, do you think you could still have that feeling of closeness? In other words, could your God simply be a mental projection?

I've asked people with very different beliefs that question and have usually received an unequivocal no: the experience is authentic. So what to do with that?

In order to keep our own beliefs safe, we must make the strong assumption that some of these people either feel close to a non-existent God, are lying, or God is genuinely present in many, seemingly contradicting, religions. If we give people the benefit of the doubt, and speak from the perspective of an evangelical, then the first option is the only possible explanation. But if that's the case – that others feel authentically close to a non-existent God – then wouldn't we be equally vulnerable to such a false feeling of

closeness?

Don't misunderstand me, I'm not claiming that real spiritual connection is nonexistent, but distinguishing between authentic experience and mental projection seems incredibly difficult.

As with any issue, both extremes are dangerous: if we always doubt spiritual experiences we will always miss God, however if we never doubt the validity of spiritual experiences we might falsely characterize God, develop false hopes, or make decisions we shouldn't have.

From my experience, Christians fall far too easily on the latter extreme and I think some skepticism – in respecting the power of confirmation bias and mental conditioning – is healthy and necessary.

## Epistemology and Postmodernism

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From questioning my own ideas of relationship with God, I began questioning how I understood God.

On an episode of the Liturgists Podcast, a study from the book [How God Changes Your Brain](#) got mentioned (the book summarizes research studies performed by a neuroscientist and a psychologist on the effect of religious and spiritual practices on the brain). In this study, the authors ask both theists (from a variety of religious/spiritual backgrounds – though primarily Evangelical Christians) and agnostics some basic questions about God (e.g. “Who is God?”, “Is God loving?”, etc.) and recorded their responses + imaged their brains during the responses.

While the agnostics, unsurprisingly, struggled to answer the questions, the theists equally struggled with the questions and reported seeming displeased with their answers, much to the authors' confusion. At first, the authors' hypothesized that perhaps the theists simply had a shallow understanding of the God they professed belief in, but the brain scans told a different story: while images of the agnostics' brains during questioning were essentially void of activity, the images of the theists' brains showed a vast network of neural connections spanning all across the different areas of the brain.

The authors' had stumbled upon what they came to call the 'God Map': a rich network of neural connections formed across a lifetime of experiences, knowledge, emotions, etc. all

associated with, and informing, the idea of “God” for that individual. Interestingly enough, very little of this network appeared to intersect with the language portion of the brain, which, they hypothesized, is why the theists had struggled to verbally answer the study’s questions.

And to some extent, this result isn’t surprising, right? I think at some level we all realize that God is ‘beyond language’. Yet, the fact that so much of our perception of God is seemingly *outside* language (and as a result, our reason) was surprising and thought provoking.

Let’s explore that idea a bit more.

In cryptography we make heavy use of an incredibly useful primitive called a *hash function*. A hash function takes in an unbounded amount of data as input, and outputs a constant sized descriptor of that data (think of it as ‘fingerprinting’ the data).

One consequence of a hash function’s compression is that it necessitates the existence of *collisions* (i.e. different inputs that result in the same output) since you’re going from a larger input space to a smaller output space ([something something pigeons going into holes](#)).

Now consider our language: on average, natural English-speakers have a vocabulary of around 40,000 words while there are, by an incredibly rough estimate, around 133,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 atoms on our earth. Of course it’s silly to consider making a word (or recursive combinations of words) for every distinct atom, but my point here is that our language will never even scratch the surface of fully capturing the world around us (in this case even just the material world). Because of those darned pigeons, our language must act similarly to a hash function, settling for simplified, generalized descriptions of the world around us; in other words, our language is incredibly *coarse* and *full of collisions*.

Crucially, because our language is so coarse, when I use a word which roughly generalizes some idea I’d like to express, almost certainly the way you understand the word will be different from what I intended.

This may seem pointless and theoretical, so let’s bring this to a relatable example: think about the word love. I love this word because it’s one the most simultaneously meaningful and meaningless words in the English language:

- I love my friends

- I love my parents
- I love my siblings
- I love the person I just started seeing
- I love the person I've been dating for 5 years
- I love my spouse of 30 years
- I love my co-workers
- I love my pet
- I love the taste of coffee
- I love the sound of a cello

I just listed 10 different types of love that I might profess, all of which are profoundly different. So how in the world did all those sentences make sense to you?

Most likely, when reading each of those sentences you projected your own ideas of *love* – all formed through your own experiences – into better understanding me. In addition, you attempted to empathize, using knowledge of me (my culture, personality, etc.) to better decipher the exact concept I was trying to express. But the fascinating, and scary, part of it all is that this incredibly complex projection and decoding is done almost entirely unconsciously (*this is essentially an exact parallel to the section on abstraction at the beginning of the memoir*).

I find it funny when a young person says, “*I love my partner,*” and some older person feels the need to interject and say something along the lines of: “*You don’t know what love is yet.*” The two are working with very different definitions of love, but our language gives little room for either party to really understand how they differ – it’s simply a matter of experience outside of language.

Such a line of inquiry becomes even more interesting when you begin asking questions like:

*Could a more complex language (i.e. one that has ten different words for each of the "love"s I just now used) actually result in a richer understanding and experience of the world around us?*

But anyways, I’m losing myself... let’s bring this all back to religion.

The concept I just briefly discussed is one intimately connected to postmodernist philosophy. Since postmodernism can refer to a vast array of ideas, here is a simple definition that I’ll work with (which is similar to [Nietzsche’s perspectivism](#)):

*Objective reality exists, but individual knowledge is always subjective.*

We reason about the world through language, but as we've just discussed our language is *coarse* and carries extraneous meaning based on our personal experiences. As a result, our *knowledge* about the world around us will always be plagued by our insufficient, biased perspective. While we can still make meaningful insights into reality, we can never understand true objectivity – only best guesses given our experience.

Neitzche summarizes this (and generalizes my point a bit) with:

[L]et us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself': these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective knowing; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be.

So how does all of this relate to the idea of understanding God?

Originally, I had an incredibly long section on this, but I recently read the excellent book by Peter Rollins called *How (Not) to Speak of God* which essentially states everything I said (and much more) considerably more succinctly and eloquently. So, in the next few paragraphs I'll simply quote him and provide some short commentary.

[Theology], in its modern form, has been concerned with upholding and defending the notion of orthodoxy as that which articulates a correct understanding of God.

...

To take our ideas of the divine and hold them as if they correspond to the reality of God is thus to construct a conceptual idol built from the materials of our mind.

As discussed, language is a course, subjective structure we have built to abstract reality. Any attempt to capture God within such a structure is like holding a light up to a dark mass and viewing the resulting shadow. The shadow may provide some information about the object, but the viewer may incorrectly interpolate aspects of the object from which the shadow originated. Additionally, the shadow might look completely different depending on where the light is shone.

This doesn't mean that we throw away any interpretation of the shadow, but we should

hold such an interpretation lightly and humbly.

If we fail to recognize that the term 'God' always falls short of that towards which the word is supposed to point, we will end up bowing down before our own conceptual creations forged from the raw materials of our self-image, rather than bowing before the one who stands over and above that creation. Hence Meister Eckhart famously prays, 'God rid me of God', a prayer that acknowledges how the God we are in relationship with is bigger, better and different than our understanding of that God.

Let's see a practical example: an essentially universally agreed on assertion in Christian theology is that "God is love," (e.g. 1 John 4:7-21). Such an assertion fundamentally affects the way I understand God and follow Jesus' commandment to love others. However, as we have already seen, the actual meaning of the word love is incredibly subjective. Thus, we must personally interpret even the most basic of theological statements through our own lived experience.

God can never be and ought never to be reduced to a mere object for consideration, for in faith God is experienced as the ultimate subject. God is not a theoretical problem to somehow resolve but rather a mystery to be participated in. This perspective is evidenced in the Bible itself when we note that the term 'knowing' in the Hebrew tradition (in contrast to the Greek tradition) is about engaging in an intimate encounter rather than describing some objective fact: religious truth is thus that which transforms reality rather than that which describes it.

...

As we have seen, we ought to affirm our view of God while at the same time realizing that the view is inadequate. Hence we act both as theist and atheist. This a/theism is not some agnostic middle point hovering hesitantly between theism and atheism but, rather, actively embraces both out of a profound faith. Just as Christianity does not rest between transcendence and immanence but holds both extremes simultaneously, so too it holds atheism and theism together in the cradle of faith.

This a/theistic approach is deeply de-constructive since it always prevents our ideas from scaling the throne of God. Yet it is important to bear in mind that this deconstruction is not destruction, for the questioning it engages in is not designed to undermine God but to affirm God.

Speaking about the Enlightenment period and its affect on the church, Rollins continues:

Although the anti-ecclesiastical slant of the time was largely rejected by the church

and many theologians wished to retain the centrality of revelation, they eagerly embraced the Enlightenment's high regard concerning reason. And so, while explicitly opposing the secularization of the time, they ended up mirroring its underlying presuppositions. The dominant thinking within both the universities and the church accepted that humans had a capacity to grasp objective, universal truth.

...

While it was readily accepted that much of God still lay in inaccessible darkness, it was claimed that what God revealed through nature, the prophets and Christ was clearly manifest to us precisely because God had spoken there ... Yet by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, ...[this idea] was placed into serious question by such perceptive thinkers as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, each of whom explored the extent to which our supposedly objective understanding of the world or God is always already affected by such factors as our education, upbringing, economic position and psychological makeup. These things persuasively uncovered the various places in which our supposedly untainted, objective and rational understanding of the world or God was influenced by a variety of large subconscious desires.

The more I examined my own reason and knowledge, the more insufficient I found them to be. I began to hold my ideas a bit more loosely. I recognized that the culture I grew up in, my education, and a million experiences outside of language shaped my conceptions of reality and God. Furthermore, my own mechanisms of reason could never begin to capture the fullness of reality or God.

And all of this was *beautiful*. It meant that even the meaning I acquired from the simplest of phrases – *God is love* – I would spend a lifetime enriching.

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I would like to share a simple exercise that I found helpful during this period: for a week, challenge yourself to only use female pronouns for God. Instead of saying *Father* say *Mother*, instead of *He* say *She*, instead of *Him* say *Her*, and instead of *His* say *Hers*.

As far as I understand, the use of predominantly-masculine descriptors for God in the Bible/history has more to do with a lack of gender-neutral words in language + male-dominated cultures than any actual theological reason. Even so, I found such a simple change in addressing God difficult: I felt uncomfortable praying to *Her*; *She* seemed foreign to me. The origin of femininity *Herself* seemed so distant from femininity in my mind.

How fascinating that a simple flipping of gendered terms was so challenging to my conception of God.

*(Just for fun I'll use strictly feminine pronouns for God in the rest of the memoir)*

## Losing God

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After a few months of exploring many of these ideas, a day came that I don't think I'll ever forget; I went on a walk to the campanile on Berkeley's campus, sat on its steps, and sat with God.

What did that word, *God*, even mean?

What does it mean to you?

For me, that word had a *presence*, a *color*, a *feeling* associated with it. I knew facts surrounding *God* and possessed a mental picture, an intuition, about *God* in a similar manner that I might have to a friend. I think anyone who grew up in the church will have a good idea of what I'm talking about.

-

I sat, thinking about how meaningful, beautiful, and foundational this presence had been in my life growing up.

-

I sat, thinking about how my upbringing provided me with my fundamental understanding of this presence, but I had little actual justification for its accuracy in describing *God*.

-

I sat, thinking about the growing dissonance between this presence and my understanding and experience of the world around me.

-

And for the first time in my life, I asked myself – *really* asked myself:



*Has this all been a fucking lie?*

–

I felt a physical *\*blink\**.

And just like that, it was gone. The presence disappeared in a flash. It legitimately felt like someone had turned the lights off in a part of my brain. The god who had seemed so real to me for my entire conscious life left me in an instant. It seemed that I had finally taken my doubts to their fullest extent: at that moment atheism and Christianity seemed equally likely to me.

I don't know how to describe what it's like to truly accept the possibility that the basis for how you approached your relationships, the basis for the way you acted, the basis for the person you wanted to be, the basis for the way you viewed the world, the being with whom you had found comfort in hard times, the being who you had asked for – and seemingly received – help in so many dark times, could have all been a mental construct. Internalizing that a life-long held worldview might be false is... frankly, fucking wild. I felt anger, frustration, sadness, confusion, but also... relief. Relief because unconsciously I think I had reached this point months before and it just took a long time for my conscious mind to fully catch up.

*My concept of God was the first thing I deconstructed.* But that had the side-effect of essentially deconstructing most of my Christian beliefs at the same time.

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I'll end this section with a poem which I found quite beautiful at the time:

*God, you were my child,  
I raised you in the womb of my perceptions,  
I coddled you with words like "Infinite One" while I cradled you in my arms,  
You brought me such comfort.*

*But then, dreamer that I was,  
stumbling through a corridor of false awakenings,  
I awoke to find that the sweet one I held was a bundle of ideas enfolded around Your shadow.*

*You were never in my arms, belief was in my arms.  
What arms could hold You?*

*What word could speak You?*

*When everytime we shape our lips around the air a tower collapses.*

*We say love, and before the syllable is erected we have eroded its foundation with our needs.*

*We say God and You turn towards us only to realize that we have been calling over Your shoulder to our traditions*

## **Sola Scriptura**

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While questioning my own understanding of God, I had also concurrently re-examined the primary way by which Christians seek to understand God: the Bible.

The previous section implicitly mentioned Biblical interpretation (in the quote by Rollins), but let's be a bit more explicit about my own process here.

*Just FYI this section is a bit more "in the weeds" than prior ones, so, especially for those reading who aren't Christian or aren't terribly interested in Biblical interpretation, just know you can safely skip to the end.*

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Within Christian faith (*another reminder that Christian ≈ Evangelical*), the Bible is at the forefront. It is considered the highest authority for doctrine: the founding phrase of Protestantism (of which Evangelical is a sub-category) was "sola scriptura" or "scripture alone" which meant to affirm the Bible as the highest authority in Christian life.

On multiple occurrences the Bible states that it is the "Word of God" or "God-breathed"; consequently, Christians believe that God 'inspired' the Biblical authors in their writing.

But hold up: we've already thrown a bunch of ill-defined phrases into the mix.

First off, hopefully it's obvious that the Bible calling itself the "Word of God" is circular reasoning: you have to already believe the Bible is from God in order for such a claim to hold validity. This is usually justified through external evidence e.g. there are prophecies in the Bible that came true after they were written, the Bible is the most well-preserved ancient text in existence, the Bible has had more impact on the world than any other book, etc. To my knowledge, all of these statements are true and formulate a convincing argument.

But more fundamentally, what exactly does it mean that scripture is the “Word of God” or “God-breathed”? There are clearly sections where God is stated to be speaking directly, but what about the other parts?

Is every word of the Bible exactly from God?

...or are the ideas in the Bible from God, but the wording up to the individual authors?

...or did the authors, who were created by God’s breath (Genesis 2:7) i.e. *God-breathed*, simply write the Bible based on their own perceived experience with God?

...or are only matters of faith and practice/morals from God, but the other stuff is dependent on the individual author?

I would encourage you to think about this question for yourself: where does your opinion lie and how would you support it? The Bible is full of seemingly contradicting narratives and opaque passages. The forming of the Biblical canon was complicated, long, and failed to produce a singular result: the major branches of Christianity use Biblical canons made up of either 66, 73, 80, or 81 books. How would you explain these facts in light of your opinion?

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Let’s assume my answer to the previous question was what I grew up with, which, as far as I understood, held that God inspired all of the content in the Bible, but this content was processed through the language/personality/culture of the individual authors. Additionally, since God inspired the content in the Bible, Christians believe the Bible is free of any error.

Christians often talk about “submitting to the authority of scripture”; this re-affirms the idea that one must live their life in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. Consequently, Christians have developed an entire field called *systematic theology* to describe, organize, and systematize the different doctrines laid out in the Bible. As a result, a Christian can read a book such as Wayne Grudem’s famous 1600-paged *Systematic Theology* and come away with a thorough framework for understanding God, the world, and how to live.

Now all of this is built up around a number of interpretative assumptions that Christians make when seeking to dissect the Bible. In the remaining space of this section, I want to discuss some aspects of that interpretive process which I began to question:

## **"Submitting to the authority of the Bible" doesn't mean what you think it does**

I'll start off with a quote from Rob Bell discussing the concept of "submitting to the authority of scripture" which connects nicely with many of my points from earlier:

This is why so many people are so confused when it comes to the Bible. They were taught by their pastor or parents or authority figures to submit to the authority of the Bible, but **that's impossible to do without submitting first to whoever is deciding what the Bible is even saying.**

...

The problem, of course, is that the folks who talk the most about the authority of the Bible also seem to talk the most about things like objective and absolute truth, truth that exists *independent of relational realities*.

What often happens, then, is people grow up or start reading or travel or go to university or make friends outside of their tribe, and in the process, they discover that things *aren't how they were told things are*.

They realize that what they were told is *simply how it is* in an absolute and objective way, is actually a set of interpretations made by actual humans. Humans who have a limited perspective.

Anytime we claim that some idea from the Bible is an absolute, objective Truth, we are really claiming that our interpretation of the Bible is an absolute, objective Truth. This doesn't mean that attempting to interpret the Bible is useless, but we must recognize where the authority we speak of truly emanates from.

In my experience, this produces one of the following two responses:

1. *"The primary doctrines in Scripture are clear enough that interpretation is obvious."*

or

2. *"Theologians have studied, and had consensus, on primary doctrines for two-thousand-some years which should give us confidence in those interpretations."*

*(Notice I said primary doctrines instead of just doctrines because I don't think I need to convince anyone that there are plenty of less-important topics the Bible is unclear about)*

The first response I agree with to an extent; going back to an example I used earlier, when Jesus says to "love your neighbor as yourself" there are many ways to

understand the concept of *loving, neighbor, yourself*, and the meaning of the phrase as a whole, but *generally speaking* I would say the concept is clear. And I believe this holds true for many of the teachings in the Bible.

However, in my experience when someone explicitly commands “submitting to the authority of scripture,” the contention is not about loving your neighbor – which most people don’t have an issue with (theoretically :P) – but some *incredibly complex* topic such as gender, sexuality, hell, etc. In my opinion, if any Christian attempts to tell you that the Bible is “clear” surrounding such issues, they have either made a number of strong, subjective assumptions, or don’t understand the topic very well.

*(I will explore the second response a bit more in a section to follow.)*

### ***Do we read this passage critically or literally?***

The Bible is filled with historical narrative, letters, parables, poetry, riddles, maxims, and prophecy. Recognizing which genre of literature a passage falls under is vital towards interpreting it correctly. For example, there are entire institutes and journals dedicated to “Christian creation science” because many choose to interpret Genesis as historical narrative rather than creation myth.

However, even if the genre of literature is clear, there are still many choices that must be made in deciphering the meaning behind a passage. Arguably the biggest difficulty comes in deciding how passages should be applied to the modern day: if a passage states something, do we take it *literally*? Or do we take it *critically*?

*I’m using the word ‘critically’ in the sense of historical criticism i.e. using historical context to discern the spirit/original meaning of the passage.*

In my opinion – and I think most Christians would agree with me in theory here – we should *always* be approaching passages critically. However, critical analysis itself is *hard* and can result in many different interpretations. As a result, in practice I’ve found that Christians tend to swap between more critical and more literal approaches rather liberally.

Fleshing out this critique would take more time than I have here, but I’ll give a quick example and expand more in the following sections.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul states that:

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

Now, most Christians I know interpret this verse critically, claiming that Paul is referring to a culturally-defined gender norm rather than universally insisting that women wear coverings while praying and men/women have particular hair lengths.

Of course, such a position requires a non-negligible amount of justification (which is oftentimes not provided). One reason for this is that the word used for *nature* here is the same *nature* used by Paul in Romans when he claims that homosexuality is *un-natural* – a verse which most Christians take literally.

Additionally, a few verses earlier Paul says that:

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

Unlike the verse on head coverings/hair length, most Christian commentaries I've read take this verse literally with minimal justification.

*Paul speaks in a cultural context where the head of every woman **was already** a man. What if he is simply saying, in terms of authority, God > Christ > humans? Explicitly claiming something along the lines of "the head of every man and woman is Christ, and the head of Christ is God," would have implied a societal equality between men and women that no-one in that culture would have taken seriously.*

Such a reasonable possibility gets little to no consideration within Christian commentaries.

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Christians will usually defend these choices of literalism by claiming that interpreting the verses this way fits into "themes" witnessed throughout the Bible. In my opinion, examining the passages which give way to those themes reveals identical interpretative dilemmas.

**Too often Christians justify certain literal interpretations using other ill-justified literal interpretations that support each-other circularly.**

Now please know that I am vastly simplifying things. Debates surrounding these passages contain much more nuance than what I'm presenting here: these topics really are *complex*. Regardless, I found that a vast number of Christian beliefs originated from surprisingly ill-supported decisions to switch between literal and critical interpretations.

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Usually beneath it all is a presumed answer.

I once sat down with a knowledgeable, older couple in my church; we had both agreed to discuss our differing opinions on complementary/egalitarian theologies. We went through a number of passages, discussing the specifics of the Greek/Hebrew being used, the historical context, and the relevant papers in biblical scholarship. Over and over again, the couple agreed that my interpretations seemed more logical given what we had discussed (*the fact that I 'won' the argument is irrelevant to my point here: I was much better prepared for the conversation*).

After about two hours of this, the couple had run out of passages or arguments to support their position but seemed completely unshaken in its validity. I asked them why their opinion didn't even seem the least bit challenged and they responded, "*Well we just think complementary themes are clearly witnessed throughout all of nature and humanity.*"

*Boom.* We had gotten down to the root issue: a well-entrenched worldview that no amount of intellectual reasoning was going to budge – a *perspective* that fundamentally drove their interpretive decisions.

And there's nothing wrong with this, remember, the whole reason I challenged complementary doctrine was because it stopped lining up with the world I observed – it felt *un-intuitive*, it felt *wrong*. I am guilty of the exact same reasoning as the couple; if a better-versed complementary theologian had argued me into a similar situation, I probably would've responded identically.

But that's the point. So often the church demonizes experience: I can't even begin to count all of the times I've been told to mistrust my experience and submit to the teachings of the Bible – but that sentiment implies an objective interpretation. In reality, interpretations are made up of many subjective decisions; decisions are made by a person's perspective informing them which choice is best; and perspective is

developed through *experience*.

Or to put it another way: our lived experience of the world around us (sometimes referred to as *general revelation*) deeply affects the way we understand God's written revelation (sometimes referred to as *special revelation*). The latter is completely meaningless without the former.

At the end of the day, the couple and I both held to the teachings of the Bible, but the Bible had given us room to hold vastly differing opinions on gender roles, differing opinions derived from interpretative decisions made according to our individual perspectives. I could disagree with the couple's opinion while still respecting it as being a perfectly reasonable interpretation, and they could do the same for me.

Here's a fun exercise I try to do occasionally: think of some belief of yours that you feel strongly about, some topic that Christians disagree on and, if brought up, you could engage in a lively discussion about. What would it take for you to change your mind on that belief? Such a process is insightful for recognizing where many of our opinions truly emanate from.

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As an aside, a key component to critically interpreting passages is understanding the surrounding culture. This should be obvious. However, on many of the most crucial topics, I have been dumbstruck with my own – and other Christians' – utter lack of knowledge concerning Jewish or Greco-Roman cultures. We so often seem to forget the many ways that those cultures were drastically different from our own.

Here's a list of some fun facts regarding sexuality, marriage, etc. in the Bible that get more or less ignored:

- Polygomy is witnessed *all* throughout the Old Testament (and never condemned morally). For example, Solomon, who the Bible teaches had wisdom beyond any other human, had *700 wives and 300 concubines* (1 Kings 11).
- Nearly all of the great spiritual leaders in the Bible (e.g. Abraham, Moses, Solomon, David, Deborah, Daniel, Jesus, Paul, etc.) would not satisfy the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3 for a church elder as most Christians literally interpret them these days.
- In both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures it was acceptable and common



practice for slave owners (married or unmarried) to have sex with their slaves. We see both Abraham and Jacob doing this in the Old Testament, and it's recorded throughout Jewish/Greco-Roman writings even past the time of Paul. [Here is a paper which explores Paul's silence on the topic](#) and includes plenty of other references if you doubt this statement (*the linked paper is actually a response to another paper I'll reference a bit later so it's probably best to wait until I talk about/link it*).

Not only did all of those facts greatly confuse me when I first really thought about them, but I also found myself struggling to answer questions like:

- What's an example of a married, monogamous couple with children – i.e. what most modern-day Christians seek to emulate – in the Bible?
- How were women viewed during Biblical times and why?
- More generally, how was gender viewed during Biblical times and why?
- How was sex (both the biological trait and the action) viewed during Biblical times and why?
- How was marriage viewed during Biblical times and why?
- How was family structure viewed during Biblical times and why?

I either couldn't think of good answers, or, upon doing more research, found that my answers were laughably wrong.

Perhaps unsurprising to some (though fairly surprising to me), in general, thought surrounding these topics in Biblical times was very very different from the modern-day Christian view. Those differences would constitute its own book, so I'll just mention it here and encourage you to look into it (*a few of the links I'll drop in future sections explore some of these differences*).

The scary part to me is that *these are important questions to answer if we want to accurately interpret the Bible*, and when reading through countless articles, sermons, or even seminary texts there was far too often a vast contrast between incredibly deep knowledge of language syntax and shockingly elementary or simply incorrect knowledge of the very people the words were being written to.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying everyone needs to know or study these things – that would be ridiculous. I'm simply pointing out that there appears to be an astounding lack of solid cultural grounding in many of our modern-day Biblical interpretations. For those of you trusted to interpret the Bible and teach others, I

would challenge you to strive for greater understanding in this area.

It's important to note here that our historical understanding of the culture in Biblical times seems to have more or less exploded in the last two decades due to a number of factors, e.g, the formulation of large, universally-accessible corpus databases. Consequently, I'm not claiming all of this is willful ignorance: simply much of our theology seems to have not caught up in incorporating many new findings.

Instead of having another study group on "Biblical manhood" it might make sense to first learn more about what masculinity actually looked like in the cultures from which you are deriving "Biblical manhood".

*[\(Here's a single chapter of a book analyzing the concept of masculinity during the time of the Synoptic Gospels - hopefully it can help give an appreciation for the immense complexity involved with these things.\)](#)*

### **Static Humanity**

Now let's address the response to my earlier claim that objective Truth from the Bible is always being filtered through a subjective interpretative process:

*"Theologians have studied, and had consensus, on primary doctrines for two-thousand-some years which should give us confidence in those interpretations."*

At face value, I completely agree with this statement. A long standing consensus makes for incredibly compelling evidence. That being said, it is critical to contextualize:

- Is it a long-standing consensus due to a historical lack of well-presented alternatives? Or has it repeatedly rebutted divergent views?
- What secondary factors are at play here? What consequences does such a consensus have? Do consensus members have any motivation to keep it in place?

When considering any meaningful consensus, these are interesting questions to explore.

So what relevance does this have here?

I am a passionate proponent of the idea that humanity is not static: over many centuries science has taught us about the physical world, theology about the spiritual

world, history/experience about past mistakes and triumphs, sociology about our behavior, psychology about our minds, and technology has revolutionized the way we live and communicate with one another.

All of this has culminated in the current moment, where fundamentally the setting in which we *develop* and *live* – particularly in industrialized nations – is, in many ways, extremely different from 2000, 1000, 500, or even 100 years ago. While biologically we are more or less the same (to my knowledge), the way we view ourselves, the way we view the world, our day-to-day lives, and many of our most existential challenges have drastically changed.

Certainly, humanity has not experienced this change uniformly, but, on a macro scale, humanity appears to be on a messy, spiraling progression towards a better understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. Consequently, much of this progression could be categorized under *general revelation*.

For example, until very recently, someone with schizophrenia would very likely have been considered demon possessed, owning another human being was considered acceptable by most, and the idea of women's suffrage was deemed absurd (*it never fails to astound me that, in the U.S., it took until 1920 for white women and 1965 for black women to gain the right to vote*). Each of these examples represents a significant shift in humanity's collective understanding of our physical bodies, spiritual warfare, inalienable rights, sex, and race.

*Note that all of those examples are relatively recent: indeed, there are a lot of differing sociological theories studying what I'm talking about here, but there is general agreement that the amount of change humanity is experiencing has rapidly accelerated in the last one-hundred years or so. This isn't really relevant to what I'm talking about here, but I just thought it's interesting to mention.*

In the 1960s, second-wave feminism swept through western countries, bringing awareness to domestic violence and marital rape, pushing for reproductive rights, and advocating for women in the workforce. At the time, such ideas were radical and predicated on a number of recent events such as women's suffrage (first-wave feminism), the Civil Rights Movement, the Industrial Revolution, and WWII. These significant industrial, academic, cultural, and political changes, combined with the cataclysmic effect of the war set the groundwork for this movement to spark and catch fire.

In fact, I don't believe it would be at all unreasonable to claim that such a movement *could* not have occurred without all of those pieces in place (with maybe the exception of the war, which acted as a catalyst); each of them led to significant societal changes which were necessary for the ideas of second-wave feminism to receive any serious amount of consideration nonetheless widespread acceptance and adoption.

OK, so what in the world does all of this have to do with theological consensus?

Consider a topic where the consensus argument often gets invoked: gender roles, i.e., complementary and egalitarian doctrine (*sorry I keep coming back to this, but it's simpler to keep a consistent example*). In far too many conversations surrounding these positions I've received the response: "but theologians have had consensus on the complementary position for thousands of years!"

There is a glaring problem with this line of reasoning: the terms "egalitarian" and "complementarian" were completely foreign terms in a religious context until the 20th century. It wasn't really until *after* second-wave feminism swept through the West that egalitarian theology began developing and, not until 1987, that the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) – which included the likes of John Piper and Wayne Grudem – formed and coined the term "complementary". This council formalized the complementary doctrine we see today, beginning with a book published in 1991 titled, "*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*".

Don't get me wrong, Christian thought throughout antiquity – at least that I've read – would most definitely be categorized as complementarian (in fact it goes much much further than most complementarians would these days). But again, it's critical to understand the cultural context these writers were coming from: women were quite literally viewed as the inferior sex. Consequently, many of the church fathers had some – quite frankly – fucked up views on women. The way they handle issues of gender roles in their writings makes it obvious that many of their views did *not* originate from the Scriptures but rather, were *already-established cultural values* which they loosely affirmed through Scripture; at no point do they give serious consideration to egalitarian arguments: such arguments hadn't been formulated yet.

Even if legitimate egalitarian arguments had been proposed, I believe Christians still would have immediately rejected them – but *not* for theological reasons. The cultural, societal, and scientific ideas at the time were so firmly patriarchal that a

doctrine that challenged such ideas would have appeared to contradict natural law itself; there's a reason why it took nearly two-thousand more years for Western societies to give women the right to vote. This reasoning perfectly explains why it was only *after* the cultural, societal, and scientific ideas began shifting away from patriarchal values in the 20th century that Christians subsequently began seriously considering egalitarian theology.

All of that being said, claiming consensus in this context is misleading: such a word implies a *decision* between different viewpoints; however, we simply observe a single, long-standing viewpoint that didn't receive serious opposition until recently. Furthermore, for many other topics for which the consensus argument is oftentimes invoked (e.g. the LGBT community), similar arguments can be made.

Again, *I'm not at all claiming that just because these ideas are newer they are necessarily correct.* I'm simply pointing out that they are just that: new. And new ideas in novel societal contexts require fresh consideration. Responding that, "the church has always thought this way," lacks necessary nuance and simply shuts down important conversations.

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The above conversation begs a much more fundamental question:

*If humanity's understanding of the world it inhabits increases over time, if – in some sense – God's general revelation to humanity is actively unfolding, might the way we interpret Her special revelation actually change as well?*

To me the answer is a clear yes.

Connecting back to the prior sections, if our understanding of the world around us – our worldview – fundamentally drives our interpretive process, then a shift in our understanding of the world will also deeply affect that process.

In fact, the gender roles topic I just discussed above would be an example of that (for those who take the egalitarian side). Here are two other, hopefully non-controversial, examples of this re-interpretation occurring in the church:

**Geocentrism:** Over a dozen passages in the Bible imply that the sun moves while the Earth stands still (e.g. Habakkuk 3:11:1, Chronicles 16:30, Psalms 96:10, etc.), and the Earth takes a central role in all of the Scriptures. Early Christians interpreted these

things to clearly teach that the Earth was the center of the universe. It wasn't until our scientific understanding of our solar system improved, that we went against centuries of church doctrine to interpret those verses differently.

**Slavery:** Slavery existed in essentially every people group within Biblical narratives. [Not a single passage discussing slavery](#) takes a moral stand against it, at the most it simply regulates the treatment of slaves. Probably most well-known of these is when Paul states:

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

1 Peter 2:18 (NIV)

The word harsh was not an unnecessary clarification. As much as many Christians like to depict slavery in this period as more like 'servanthood', that [simply isn't accurate](#): this was ownership of another human, oftentimes involving physical abuse and sexual exploitation.

Unsurprisingly, the echoing silence from the Scriptures on this widespread cultural practice gave plenty of ammunition to Christians who, for centuries, argued that slavery was acceptable: *"The Bible would have said something if it was wrong, furthermore it oftentimes condones the practice: for example, Paul clearly states that slaves should submit to their masters, with the exact same language used to instruct wives to submit to their husbands!"*

However, as humanity began to recognize the inherent dignity of each individual, as *our understanding of ourselves* improved, we recognized slavery for the dehumanizing practice that it was and changed our theology.

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There's much one could discuss about both of these examples. In the former, we have a clear example of the Biblical authors' personal views subtly being interjected into Scripture and leading to *incorrect doctrine* for thousands of years. In the latter, we have a widespread, terribly immoral practice which the Scriptures come closer to condoning than to condemning.

When discussing slavery in the Bible, I've often heard the question: *"Why didn't Jesus, Paul, etc. say something about this? Why not speak out and prevent thousands of years of suffering for slaves?"*

In my opinion, that question completely misses the point I'm trying to drive home here: *there are aspects of God's revelation which we only have the capacity to understand with time*; in the same way it took 2000 years of cultural movements, scientific discoveries, and philosophical revolutions for humanity to come to the collective understanding that women should hold equal societal standing to men, it would take a similar process for humanity to recognize the immorality of slavery.

Jesus, being God and all, recognized that fact and, thus, doesn't directly say, "hey stop having slaves," rather She condemns the practice in a much more subversive way:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

Throughout the New Testament we see this point re-iterated multiple times: your race, your social class, your gender, none of that matters in the eyes of God – all are considered equal. That idea, universal human dignity, was *radical* like *really radical* for the time, it was the underlying idea that eventually would lead humanity to reject slavery altogether.

So what do we have? We have God interacting with humanity during a time of history where, yes, slavery was allowed, but more fundamentally humanity's view of itself was one of class and status – one where certain people were fundamentally seen as less-than. Rather than attack the effect – slavery – She attacks the cause: **"No, not one of you is lesser in my eyes."**

In other words, God *meets* humanity in their cultural moment while actively *pushing* them towards a healthier understanding of themselves and of Herself.

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All of this to say that much of our theology tries to interpolate a straight line through the Bible: we read about these different people groups spread throughout time encountering God in a variety of ways, and try to stitch those encounters into a singular, cohesive narrative.

In doing so we skip over the fact that, just as humanity drastically changes over time, so does, seemingly, the way God reveals Herself in the Scriptures.

For example, growing up I never heard anywhere close to a reasonable explanation for the contradictory depictions of God presented in the Old and New Testament. In the former, God is killing people for failing to impregnate women and ordering mass genocides; in the latter, She instructs people to turn the other cheek at offense.

I used to joke that Christianity is really just New-Testament-Christianity because we would more or less ignore the huge number of absolutely terrible and horrific passages in the Old Testament that painted drastically different pictures of God than what we affirmed.

Unless you allow your interpretive process to take into account the differences between cultures, how God might be revealing Herself differently to reach those cultures, and how the worldviews of the human authors might have affected their writings, you simply end in utter absurdity trying to reconcile the two testaments.

A pastor and Gospel Coalition writer, Joshua Butler, actually makes a similar argument to mine when addressing this question in his book: [The Skeletons in God's Closet](#). The book's methodology, and Butler himself, are staunchly conservative theologically, so I would definitely recommend it if you think what I'm proposing here is crazy.

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I'll end this section with one more example of God's special revelation changing over time. I could give a few more reasonable examples which you'd probably all agree with, but that sounds a bit boring. Instead, let me throw out a much more controversial one just to have some fun :)

In Christianity, the idea of *substitutionary atonement* is the doctrine that Jesus died on the cross as a *substitute* for us so that we may be *atoned*. There are many variations of this belief but it essentially states that Jesus needed to die for some reason (e.g. to take the punishment for sin on himself, to defeat death, etc.).

In my opinion, substitutionary atonement is completely true and also complete bullshit.

Strong words, I know.

Let's remember the religious landscape at the time of Jesus's death. At this point, the Scripture is just the Hebrew Bible and the Second Jewish Temple still stands. Jewish



priests would consistently offer sacrifices composed of food and slaughtered animals to atone for the sins of the people (“*Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*” - Hebrews 9:22), and, in fact, the Greek and Roman gods also required sacrifices by their people. Indeed, at that time the modern thought was very much that *gods require sacrifice*.

So when Jesus dies, it makes perfect sense why the immediate understanding became that “Christ died for our sins” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3). The idea of Jesus being the ‘sacrifice of sacrifices’ fits exactly into the societal and religious context of that time and, arguably, Jesus himself might have taught as much to his apostles (though it’s not recorded) since the New Testament writings after the Gospels echo this thought process.

But how well does that concept translate to our modern day? Such a belief essentially implies that God needs a blood sacrifice to save humanity. That seems rather limiting on God, no? Does the omnipotent creator of the universe really *have* to come down to creation and kill Herself in order to accomplish Her goals? Couldn’t She just... do it? Do we really believe in a God that *requires* a blood sacrifice to accomplish Her goals?

Ironically enough, I bet if you asked most Christians to describe a god who required a blood sacrifice most would use the word “pagan”. In my mind blood sacrifice is correlated with ancient, primitive religions. To me, a god who requires a blood sacrifice to accomplish something seems punitive, weak. Such a god seems inhumane.

So what if that wasn’t actually the case, what if God never required a blood sacrifice? What if the Old Testament statutes commanding sacrifices were simply God’s way of meeting a culture with a deeply-ingrained sacrificial worldview? What if Jesus’ death, rather than accomplishing a spiritual reality, *demonstrated* a spiritual reality: “*You don’t need to sacrifice anymore. That’s not who I am.*” In other words, what if Jesus’ death was fundamentally about progressing humanity’s understanding of God: Her unfathomable love for humanity, Her power over death, and that She is not a God who requires sacrifice?

The fascinating part about such a theory is that it doesn’t actually contradict any of the more traditional atonement theories – as I mentioned earlier those were *most definitely* how the apostles and the early church understood Christ’s death. I’m not claiming they were wrong in how they understood the event: I believe they

understood it *precisely* as God intended, but that understanding wasn't completely accurate *because* humanity hadn't progressed past the incorrect idea that all gods required sacrifices.

Do you see how God's revelation changed? The core idea remains the same – God no longer requires sacrifices – but the reasoning behind it drastically simplified and speaks very differently to the character of God Herself as a result of our progressed understanding of the concept of *sacrifice*.

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When I first heard this alternate explanation I laughed out loud. Both at its seeming ridiculousness, but also surprising explanatory power.

I had always found our Christian obsession with blood strange: I can't even count the number of times I've been weirded out while singing about Jesus' blood washing over me. The theology surrounding substitutionary atonement had always felt disconnected from the world around me... something about the source of the universe condemning me to Hell unless I killed a goat for Her just didn't sit right.

Viewing the doctrine in the way I've described here gave room both to affirm the understanding of early Christians and resolve my own cognitive dissonance.

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OK, that was a lot. Hopefully I didn't scare too many of you off (or you just skimmed to get here :P).

TLDR an integral aspect of my deconstruction was questioning the interpretive process which derived many of my beliefs. Most of those questions centered around how culture plays a role in shaping Biblical narrative and how we should apply those narratives to our modern-day.

Again, after writing this entire section, I read Peter Rollins' *How (Not) to Speak of God* which, much more eloquently, summarizes much of what I've described here (*I really wish I had read this book sooner haha*):

The first thing we notice when reading about God in the Bible is that we are confronted, not with a poverty of descriptions concerning God, but rather with an excess of them. We do not find some simple linear, understanding of [Yahweh]

developing throughout the text, and thus we do not find a single, coherent definition of God as proclaimed by many contemporary churches. In the Bible we find a vast array of competing stories concerning the character of God that are closely connected to the concrete circumstances of those who inhabit the narrative. Just as personality tests offer us an unrealistic image of ourselves as a single whole, overlooking the fact that we are not only many different things in many different situations but also changing over time, so Western theology has all too often reduced the beautiful varied and complex descriptions of God found in the Bible to a singular reading that does violence to its vibrant nature. The Bible itself is a dynamic text full of poetry, prose, history, law, and myth all clashing together in a cacophony of voices. We are presented with a warrior God and a peacemaker, a God of territorial allegiance and a God who transcends all territorial divides, an unchanging God and a God who can be redirected, a God of peace and a God of war, a God who is always watching the world and a God who fails to notice the oppression against Israel in Egypt.

The interesting thing about all of this is not that these conflicts exist but that we know they exist. In other words, the writers and the editors of the text did not see any reason to try and iron out these inconsistencies – inconsistencies that make any systematic attempt to master the text both violent and irredeemably impossible. Unlike the modern ideal of systematization in definition, these people celebrated the fact that, as Meister Eckhart once claimed, the unnameable is omni-nameable. Evidently such conflicts were not judged to be problematic but were accepted. Indeed, such fissures help to prevent us from forming an idolatrous image of God, ensuring that none of us can legitimately claim to understand God as God really is. Consequently the text bars any attempt at colonization by individuals or groups who claim to possess an insight into its true meaning. The biblical text resists such idolatrous reading precisely because it contains so many ideological voices, held together in creative tension, ensuring the impossibility of any final resolution. The result is not an account that is hopelessly ideological, but rather a text that shows the extent to which no one ideology or group of ideologies can lay hold of the divine. The text is not only full of fractures, tensions, and contradictions but informs us that fractures, tensions and contradictions are all we can hope for.

...

For instance, let us imagine entering a museum and contemplating one of the exhibits. The painting could be said to offer us a type of revelation, for it stands before us and communicates a message. However, the message of a piece of art is not simple, singular, or able to be mastered. This is evidenced in the fact that different people will take away different meanings from the same artifact, demonstrating that

the message is concealed, elusive, and fluid. When we ask ourselves about the meaning of the artwork, we are immediately involved in an act of interpretation which is influenced by what we bring to the painting. In a similar way, the revelation of God should be compared to a parable that speaks out of an excess of meaning. This means that revelation offers a wealth of meaning that will be able to speak in different ways to those with ears to hear. The parable is given to us, but at the same time its full wealth of meaning will never be fully mined. It is not reducible to some clear, singular, scientific formula but rather gives rise to a multitude of commentaries.

## Mysticism

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After deconstructing much of my conception of God, my process for interpreting the Bible, and a number of other beliefs surrounding various Christian doctrines, I was more or less at ground zero. I still had kept many of my most foundational faith assumptions – like taking the claims and teachings of Jesus for granted – but where I went from there seemed uncertain.

Regardless, I recalled this quote from earlier

Yet it is important to bear in mind that this deconstruction is not destruction, for the questioning it engages in is not designed to undermine God but to affirm God.

and earnestly jumped into exploring new ideas from thinkers all over the Christian spectrum: from Tim Keller and John Piper to Rob Bell and Richard Rohr.

The diversity of opinions constantly challenged my beliefs. On many of the topics I felt most conflicted by, it honestly seemed impossible to come to any confident position from a strictly intellectual perspective. There were simply so many highly-subjective interpretive assumptions and inferences supporting all of these theologies – how was I to decide between them?

Eventually I reminded myself of a very simple fact: a diversity of opinions exists on these topics precisely *because* there is no clearly-superior argument, there is no provably-correct narrative. The goal I so desperately pursued, certainty, would always elude me.

So I stopped holding on so tight. I tried to let go of feeling that I *needed* to know what

was right – recognizing that such a desire can so easily lead one to cling to comfortable-but-false beliefs. Of course, I would still make assumptions, and pursue truth as best I could from those assumptions, but I had to truly internalize that my knowledge had limits, that my assumptions would not be perfect, and that I would be wrong. A lot.

This posture towards knowledge, particularly in a spiritual context, eventually led me to an approach towards theology many would term as *mysticism*. Mysticism is a scary word, and means many different things to different people; if I had to define mysticism for myself I would simply read this excellent quote:

*Like everyone else, I've spent my life trying to find safety by building a view of the world that makes sense. I feel best when these views help me find a secure place in a community of other people, and when I find a way of seeing things that make me feel safe I can become obsessed with defending it. This may be views about God, or views about which political party is best to vote for, or maybe even which musical group is the greatest of all time. Whatever it is, I want to feel certain that I am right because that certainty means I am safe and that the rug under me will under no circumstances be pulled out. But Life is tricky, and a masterful puller of rugs. Too many times in Life, I have found myself on the floor with a sore backside watching with astonishment as Life walks away with yet another treasured rug. I am a Christian, then an Atheist, then unmoored, confused, and rug-less. It is here at the end of all my ideas I get a glance of freedom – back to that first moment of each day as the symphony of senses plays on regardless of how I try to categorize – and therefore control – the experience. Mysticism has taught me that the first moments after waking are very important because your response to awareness can reshape each day and therefore your entire life experience. On a mystical morning it begins with: I am. I am awake. I am aware. I am temporary. I am a brain telling itself a story. I am as Julian of Norwich so beautifully stated, 'made of God.' I am not in control of this moment, or any moment at all. I am free to experience this moment without trying to control or understand it. I am able to understand some things some times, but getting too invested in this understanding often leads to loss and heartache. I am choosing to be grateful and to be aware of this moment and to be at all. I am choosing to hold loosely to my understanding. I am choosing to release my need for certainty in every moment. I am alive for another day and determined to savor its joys and sorrows. I am. Mysticism is about what happens at the end of the road of knowing. It is not some gleeful rejection of knowledge or wisdom, some sort of willful spiritual ignorance, instead, it is about an understanding that our knowledge has limits. And when we consider the greatest of all things, language, knowledge, and human constructs can't bottle the unspeakable. Through years of mystical practice and quite a lot of therapy I have learned to hold my ideas about God loosely, and that's led me to hold all of my ideas loosely, and that*

*has led to a beautiful journey of losing my intellectual ego. Though this loss caused grief, it has led to a profound fascination in hearing the stories and experiences that other people have in life, especially those people who understand God differently than I do which is, of course, everyone. It has led to a lot less stress as I recognize the folly of trying to control my life or the lives of other people. But most of all, steering my awareness towards a mystical view of reality has shown me that beauty is all around me all the time in very unexpected places: those parts of the universe that I once saw as unclean. Because they are made of God too, whatever that means.*

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Anyways, everything thus far has been a vague summary of where I was spiritually in August 2020 and how I got there.

In the remaining space I have, I'm going to forget about any sense of timeline and discuss two topics which were particularly relevant throughout this entire process.

## Hell

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While I have essentially omitted any mention of it until now, the doctrine of Hell I grew up with was one of the first beliefs I ever completely rejected.

Here's an incredibly poor description of what most Christians believe about Hell and not-going-to-Hell:

- Hell is very bad. Think eternal separation from God, utter darkness, and fiery torture at the hand of the Devil.
- People can not-go-to-Hell by becoming Christian. There are primarily two views on how this happens:
  1. *Arminianism*: each person has free will to become a Christian: the choice is up to them.
  2. *Calvinism/Reformed*: people do not have the free will to become a Christian, those who become Christian were 'predestined' by God to do so.

I was raised with view (2): Calvinism. As a result, I – technically – didn't believe that I had any sort of 'urgent' need to evangelize to people: my action or inaction wouldn't be the

deciding factor of whether someone got saved or not. That being said, in reality I would often live in a way more aligned with (1), feeling a constant pressure to evangelize to others; and how could I not? If I really understood the *Truth*, a Truth that would rescue people from eternal torment, how could I do anything but tell them about it?

At the same time, I recognized that most people didn't want to be evangelized to, and doing so would probably just end up separating me from my friends. As a result, I rarely forced conversations of faith with my non-Christian friends, but felt constant guilt for not doing so.

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In highschool, I was a close confidant for many of my friends. I found that, compared to many other people I knew, I had a high bandwidth for empathy and would spend entire days simply listening to my friends; some jokingly referred to me as their therapist.

However, in college this began to change. I found myself emotionally exhausted after simple conversations, and gave increasingly less effort towards fostering the same level of intimacy with many of my new friends.

I began to realize that this was because, unlike in high-school, most of my college friends were *not* Christian. If what I believed about the afterlife – particularly Hell – was true then, in all likelihood, many of my friends would spend the rest of their lives in eternal torment. As a result, simple conversations became taxing as I struggled with how to evangelize, and growing closer to these individuals simply made the realization of eternal torment even more painful for me.

My first weekend retreat with my acappella group freshman year, one of the most fun and intimate experiences of my entire life up to that point, ended with me sobbing in my dorm room for hours. I loved my friends *so much*, but that intense love simply compounded my suffering as I contemplated their eternal fate and my desire to evangelize to them. Over time the pain numbed, but never completely; after my deepest moments of connection with my non-Christians friends, I would often find myself in tears, overwhelmed with pain for their probable fate.

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The immense emotional toll of these thought processes caused me to examine my beliefs about salvation fervently. In my opinion, the Bible could honestly go either way on the topic of Calvinism vs. Arminianism: there's sufficient support for both beliefs. While I was

raised Calvinist, and that's what I personally thought was more reasonable from a strictly theological perspective, I began to back up and ask, "Do either of these doctrines make actual sense?"

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Many of my Reformed teachers growing up professed a deep desire to evangelize to others and share their faith but simultaneously trusted God for the final outcome in a way which left them, as far as I could tell, more or less not feeling personally responsible for the souls of others.

For many years, I longed for that degree of faith. I wanted to care, but not feel completely overwhelmed when contemplating my friends' salvation.

However, my efforts to achieve such a level of trust in God simply left me questioning the character of God Herself due to the simple fact that Calvinism taught me two seemingly-contradictory facts about God:

- God is love
- God is completely sovereign and predestines who is saved from Hell

If God chooses who goes to Heaven, then She, implicitly, also chooses who goes to Hell. How can a God who selects people for Hell be loving? If I, an imperfect human made in the image of God, could do nothing but cry out for my friends to be saved, how could God not do the same and act accordingly?

Of course, Reformed thinkers have composed many different arguments refuting such a critique. I'm not going to go into the specifics of these refutations, but, in my opinion, they all reduce down to intellectual fluff over the same fundamental problem.

The more honest Reformed thinkers I have read will simply respond with a theological shrug: this apparent contradiction is simply a mystery of God that we can't understand. To me, this is a meaningless cop-out: there is little room for 'mystery' when contemplating causing someone I *love* to suffer for eternity.

So, Calvinism left me with a seemingly irresolvable contradiction surrounding God's fundamental nature.

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Ok, so what about Arminianism?



I took an (Arminian) evangelism class in high-school with the following stated motivation:

What if your best friend was trapped in a burning building and you knew if you didn't try to rescue them, they were going to burn to death. What kind of friend would you be if you just let them burn? Not a very good one, right?

How are you supposed to do anything but try to evangelize with a moral imperative like that? How can I enjoy a relationship, enjoy intimacy with a friend, when I truly believe they're trapped in a burning building and I might be able to save them?

I think it's psychologically impossible; I certainly found it to be. If you truly believed that people were going to spend eternity in Hell, and you had a chance to save them, how would you do anything but try to do that? Wouldn't you be a monster if you did anything else?

So, Arminianism left me with an utterly overwhelming responsibility to evangelize that felt completely immobilizing.

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Underlying both doctrines was simply a *severity* that seemed completely unhinged. Even on my worst enemy – even for an individual as terrible as Hitler – I would *never* wish for eternal torture.

What could a human possibly do in their finite life to deserve an eternal punishment? Even if Hell was somehow justice, what exactly did the Jews who died in Auschwitz do to deserve it? Or someone like Gandhi? How about the countless billions of people who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel?

Very quickly I stopped finding satisfying answers to very straightforward problems plaguing traditional ideas of Hell.

I found it particularly interesting that the same circles which held to traditional ideas of Hell also seemed to love C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*: a book which painted a drastically different picture of the afterlife. My – perhaps cynical – opinion was that many Christians, consciously or unconsciously, recognized the terrible implications of their own beliefs and longed for something different. Why else would we seem so drawn to a story which fundamentally contradicted our own theology?

Eventually, I decided to do more research into how the traditional view of Hell developed,

and, honestly, it wasn't very convincing. It's not too difficult to make a strong argument that the way we describe Hell is a caricature inspired more by ancient, pagan religions than anything taught in the Bible (again, Joshua Butler's [The Skeletons in God's Closet](#) which I linked earlier is a great starting resource from a more conservative theological view).

Needless to say, after a bit more study, fire and brimstone no longer made sense logically or theologically.

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Letting go of these traditional ideas of Hell had an incredibly significant effect on my life.

For years, my view on the afterlife had deeply colored my relationships with non-Christians. Here is an excerpt I wrote back in my freshman year of college:

What if I firmly believe that everyone who doesn't believe in Jesus is going to Hell?

How does that affect my love?

I can talk to someone about spirituality, but I will probably only listen to respond. I may speak in hypotheticals about their beliefs, but I can't authentically engage with them. I can't truly appreciate where they are at unless I know it ends with coming to what I believe is True.

In fact, it becomes difficult to even enjoy the relationship at all unless there's some hope of conversion in the end. The more I love them, the more of God I see in them, the more my heart longs, hopes, and cries for their conversion. And what am I left to do if that conversion never comes? How can I do anything but try with all my heart to evangelize to them?

So with my non-Christian friends, there is always this underlying motive, this unrest. Within every conversation, every interaction, there's a deep desire that they see the Truth because *this could save their life*.

And no matter how hard I try, as long as there's this motivation I don't think I can truly *be with* people. I am simply looking through them and imagining what they could be, what I *hope* they could be, what I believe they *should* be.

Mind you, this is not something unique to Christianity. To give a terrible analogy, nearly everyone would struggle to engage with a friend who enjoyed hurting people: the

outcome of that friend's position would be harmful to themselves and others. Love for your friend and other people would (hopefully) pressure you to correct your friend. In other words, we all have moral standards for ourselves and others – moral imperatives – which can lead to the same effect I described above. But compared to the vast majority of reasonable moral imperatives, *the Christian belief in Hell is far far more significant and broad in scope.*

It is one thing to feel a moral imperative to change a friend's behavior because it is demonstratively harmful, it is in an entirely different league to feel a moral imperative to change a friend's *entire worldview* because of a *theoretical, unfathomable punishment.*

Anyways, I digress. My shifted ideas of the afterlife left me without a *need* to change people's fundamental beliefs. Intimacy with my non-Christian friends no longer involved an overdose of cognitive dissonance: the emotional stamina and genuine curiosity towards others that I felt in high-school flooded back, even stronger than before.

Not only did I feel more energy to invest in others, but I found that many friends seemed much more willing to open up to me. In ways that I couldn't fully understand, my changes in belief altered my behavior in a way which made others feel more comfortable around me. Ironically enough, I probably did more 'evangelizing' than ever before. I wasn't desperately trying to convince people that they needed to see things my way, I was simply helping others figure out their own feelings, wrestle with their questions, and help them along their journeys of spiritual discovery – for some that was in the context of Christianity, and for others it wasn't.

All of this to say that changing my ideas of Hell was, practically, one of the most impactful changes I've ever made in my life.

## Purity Culture

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I almost didn't write this section.

Throughout this memoir I have tried my best (*which probably hasn't been great*) to keep a questioning, calm tone compared to an accusatory or aggressive one on topics which I feel strongly about. But such a tone is hard to maintain when there is a large amount of emotional baggage associated with the issue in question. Because of that, I worried that

this section might stain your perception of the rest of the memoir.

However, after some thought I realized that my narrative would be incomplete if I didn't include this so, be warned, the tone of this section will diverge from the rest of the memoir.

Also note, the timeline goes a bit "out of bounds" here: the rest of the memoir only covers up to August 2020, this will go all the way up until March 2021.

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Let me be upfront: I am diametrically opposed to purity culture.

When I say 'purity culture' many of you will probably think of the ~1980-90s movement that swept evangelicalism in response to the AIDS epidemic and the free love era of the 1960-70s. This movement focused on sexual purity and abstinence before marriage, but it radicalized these concepts by introducing a notion of 'emotional purity' and depicting love and sex as a finite resource: the more you date, the more you have sex with other people, the less you will have to give to your future spouse (e.g. passing around a piece of tape... if you know you know).

Those ideas – the emotional purity + love and sex as a finite resource – are disgusting and, in my opinion, rather blatantly in contradiction to basic Christian ideals. I hope that I don't need to say anything more. It takes a very basic level of human empathy to recognize such abstinence-fear-tactics as damaging and dehumanizing.

No, what I have a problem with, and what I mean when I say purity culture, is much more broadly the culture and practices stemming from the specific doctrines on human sexuality and abstinence before marriage that are taught in conservative Christian spaces. In other words, I disagree with far more than simply passing a chewed piece of gum around (if you know you know):

**The church's teaching on sex fosters individuals with deeply unhealthy and disembodied views of themselves and their sexuality, leaving countless many scarred, traumatized, and forced to endure years of emotional baggage; it cultivates shame towards the subject of sex, perpetuating cultures of abuse and leaving individuals and couples hurt and confused as to how to be healthy sexual partners; in many ways, it closely mirrors the asceticism of the early church by implicitly teaching an innate aversion to and mistrust in sexual pleasure; and when it fails to give satisfying answers for why abstinence before marriage is healthy or even a Christian ideal, it utilizes fear and shame tactics to silence those**

**asking.**

I don't claim these things lightly. I have listened to far too many horror stories from my peers and read too many books/studies on purity culture to not confidently believe that these statements hold true on an individual and wide-spread basis within Christian culture. But more fundamentally, I can speak confidently about it because I've personally experienced many of these effects in my own life.

To put it bluntly, the church's teachings on sex have led to years of panic attacks, depressive episodes, bodily dysfunction, internalized shame, and negative stigmas towards nearly every aspect of my sexuality.

At its worst, purity culture produced weeks of painful cycles where I would wake up with an intense sick feeling in my stomach: a hatred for and fear of my body, anger at myself and my upbringing, and the most profound, paralyzing sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Those feelings would be so overwhelming that the only thing I could do was sit on the floor and sob – from anywhere to 30-60 minutes at a time. Sometimes multiple times a day. Just thinking about how painful those periods were, even years later, brings tears to my eyes.

I'm oversharing here in order to drive the point home: this is not an issue that you can simply brush off as either an intellectual one or a problem with "those other Christians." This is a problem in the communities I grew up with, *your* communities. These painful experiences were the result of the teachings and culture that you all raised me in.

Please know that I love you all and I know that your intentions were only for the best. But intentions do not fix fundamentally broken beliefs. I am simply calling out a belief that I believe is broken because it broke me.

Also, it goes without saying that **critiquing Christian practices does not equate to endorsing secular ones**. If I state the opinion "*sex before marriage is healthy in some situations*" and you internally respond, "*but that allows for hookup culture and hookups leads to STIs, emotional dissatisfaction, and commitment iss-*" please stop yourself. Recognize that you are coping with the uncertainty of a nuanced opinion that disagrees with your own by equivocating it with something entirely different. Trust me, I have plenty of reservations with the way our culture treats sex, but we are talking about abstinence, not Tinder.

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One of my favorite books on this topic comes from a Christian therapist who encountered so many Christian clients with issues stemming from purity culture that she decided to write a book about it. The book is intended for other therapists, but I found it incredibly helpful in forming personal practices for myself. She summarizes the bulk of my complaints with Christian purity culture better than I ever could:

Jesus's example was one of self-giving, of deep love, and of setting people free from the things that imprisoned them, and I and others had experienced his healing and liberating power. So why was it that each year I would hear so many stories of sexual pain and suffering from family therapy students, many of whom were Christians actively seeking to follow Jesus's example? If they were trying to order their lives around the teaching of someone as liberative as Jesus of Nazareth, why were they hurting so badly? Why were they so deeply frustrated and despairing in their sexuality? True, some of the situations I encountered had originated from poor choices or from unusual challenges in their current sexual relationships. But on balance, what seemed pervasive was a deep distrust of the body and of sexuality, and for many, a deep distrust in the other gender, or even in intimacy and marriage itself.

As I explored these questions, I began to learn that much of that sexual suffering was generally rooted in either of two primary venues, or sometimes both. One was a culture of silence or of punishment around forms of sexual curiosity, and the other was a social culture that defined sex and the body as objects for pleasure without any consideration for relationship and mutual care. My clients, both men and women, expressed feeling ashamed of their sexual desires or experiences. They told of long histories of seeing sexual desire as something wrong, impure, or problematic about them. Women described a sense of disdain for their bodies—how they looked, how they felt, their desire or lack of it. Men spoke about feeling entitled to sex and then disappointment in their sexual relationships, or a sense of confusion and naïveté around what to expect from their partner, or even around rudimentary skills like how to love, how to touch, or what was needed to bring their partner pleasure. In nearly all cases, there was an obvious lack of grounding in any form of sex education—positive or spiritually rooted—a scarcity that was compounded by conservative Christianity's pervasive, sex-negative message of what not to do with each other. All in all, it was a toxic mixture, one that left men and women ill-prepared for eroticism and physical pleasure with each other.

In many cases, clients had spent their formative years wanting, shaming, repressing, secretly touching, engaging in recreational sex, and living in a culture that objectified sex and bodies. They felt at odds with their bodies, with their partner (if they had

one), and with their faith, all at the same time.

I'd encourage you to go back and read that again – it's a lot. Now I'll do my best to bring some of those points, and a few others, to life.

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I was in 5th grade when my parents had the 'talk' with me. Or really I should say parent: my mom wasn't involved at all from what I remember. My dad and I went on a weekend retreat to Julian, rented a cute hotel room, ate good food, and went on some beautiful hikes. I remember the occasion fondly: it was one of the first times I ever got to be in snow (!!)

 and symbolized a coming-of-age.

While there, we went through a program called Passport2Purity which essentially absolved my dad from having to give the sex talk himself. However, the program spent most of its time covering topics adjacent to sex: from bullying and peer pressure, to bodily changes due to puberty, to how to set personal physical boundaries, to 'courting' instead of dating (it also contained plenty of the toxic material I mentioned earlier e.g. poking holes in balloons... if you know you know). In fact, my only memory of actual sexual education was the narrator saying something along the lines of: "When a married couple decides to have sex they take off their clothes, touch each other's bodies, speak lovingly to one another, and the man inserts his penis into the woman's vagina."

The only other times sex came up again within family/community settings was in discussions of abstinence, male study groups about controlling sexual desires, discussing some story involving sex in hushed tones, or my mom skipping through sex scenes in movies.

In other words, 99% of my sex education was simply about *avoiding* anything related to sex. Perhaps there was more that I don't remember, but either way proves my point: Christian culture does an absolutely terrible job of sexual education.

It was only later in my upbringing that I realized that I had no idea about different types of contraceptives, how they worked, or where to buy them. I had no idea what the various types of STDs were, how they spread, or how they were treated. I had no concept of sexual anatomy: if you had given me an unlabeled map of male or female sexual organs anytime throughout high-school I would've failed miserably. In fact, I really had no concept of what 'sex' was outside of kissing and penetrative sex.

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When I've brought these critiques up I often get something along the lines of: "*sex is a private thing and couples should just figure it out on their own.*"

Ask yourself, how much of you saying that is a cop-out that stems from your own insecurities and shame towards sex? Do you really think that it's valuable or healthy that your kids learn these things on their own? Or do you just feel uncomfortable talking about the subject? Because guess what, if you aren't educating them they're probably going to gain their conception of sex from porn or learn about what an STD is when a sore pops up on their groin. If you truly value your childrens' well-being, step up, and encourage those uncomfortable conversations that shouldn't be that uncomfortable.

*Sexual education should be 100 minute-long conversations, not one 100-minute long conversation*

Or do you really expect that 10-year old me was prepared to ask every single question about sex that I would ever have?

A healthy relationship with sex begins with education, and that begins with parents, and communities, building a culture that proactively seeks to disseminate knowledge and encourage questions about it.

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On top of an essentially non-existent education with regards to sex, in all my talks with parents or mentors, all the sermons I attended, or in any of the numerous Christian books I read, *I was never taught how to healthily communicate within intimacy*. I never learned how to navigate relational conflict. I never learned how to voice my own insecurities or desires, or how to make room for the same in a partner. I never learned about power dynamics and how they can affect decision making. I never learned about the idea, or incredibly vast importance, of enthusiastic consent.

For all of its focus on long-term monogamy, it seemed like the only advice Christian culture provided on living a healthy marriage was to construct a patriarchal household. I'm sure more came when you were actually married, but if so it came **far too late** – relationship wisdom needs to be imparted *before* one starts having relationships and certainly before one commits to a life-long relationship.

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While I never learned very much *about* sex or healthy intimacy growing up, experiences



surrounding these topics were abundant:

- I was thirteen when my parents read me the book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* because I began frequent conversations with a girl. We read a number of other similar books throughout middle-school and high-school.
- I got along much more easily with girls than guys: a majority of my closest friends growing up were girls. However, I wasn't allowed to hangout with girls in anything less than a group of 4 (usually 5 if there were two girls involved). This, combined with the fact that I saw friends less frequently because I was home-schooled, meant that a majority of my closest friendships growing up were carried out virtually.
- I read multiple books that talked about 'battling' lust, not watching porn, and not masturbating.
- I attended multiple men's Bible groups that talked about 'battling' lust, not watching porn, and not masturbating.
- I had many conversations with my dad and other Christian accountability partners about 'battling' lust, not watching porn, and not masturbating.

To be honest, growing up it felt like sex was my biggest relational, and spiritual barrier.

Sex, or the possibility of it, kept me from seeing, or truly building community, with many of my dearest friends. I remember endlessly arguing with my parents about this topic... The community's draconian approach to friendships between the opposite sex taught me to hyper-sexualize my relationships with girls and doubt my own intentions of friendship. Instead of learning how to acknowledge sexual attraction, set/respect boundaries, and view women as whole individuals, I was taught that sex defined my relationship with them, it was a force that neither of us could resist, and so I best avoid the situation altogether. These teachings internalized a habit of objectifying women and my relationships with them as objects of sex, and I was never taught, or given the opportunity to build, a skill-set to healthily regulate my own sexual desires.

Furthermore, it left me feeling isolated and broken: after all, if friendships with girls were really so impossible, why did they come so much more easily to me than friendships with guys? Deep down was I really just looking for sex? Was there something wrong with me?

It's saddening to reflect on the effect that heavily restricting opposite-sex relationships had on me as a growing teen and young adult. It was dehumanizing and harmful. It

neutered many relationships and oversexualized others.

In line with all of that, sexual desire and masturbation became my largest spiritual struggle. I was taught that as a man, lust would be one of the difficult sins to resist, and it certainly seemed like it. From the age of 11, I went through endless cycles of trying my hardest not to masturbate, succeeding for a few days/weeks, then masturbating again and feeling terrible about myself, feeling like an addict relapsing, feeling like a spiritual failure, but most of all: I *always* felt furthest from God in those moments. I would cry out, praying for God to forgive me, to give me strength, and the cycle would continue.

In many ways, the main indicator of my spiritual health became whether or not I was masturbating. I knew that this wasn't correct from a theological perspective – I didn't earn my way into being close with God – but at the same time how could I feel close when I was actively disobeying the direct commandment not to lust? Regardless of its 'correctness', this is what I internalized (*re: the earlier section on our relationship with God*).

I deeply, deeply believed the things I was taught surrounding sex, and, as a result, for 7 years anything involving sexual desire was a mixture of shame, freedom, hatred, happiness, frustration, satisfaction, helplessness, and purpose. Though, if I'm being completely frank, it was much more often shame, hatred, frustration, and helplessness: the longest I ever stopped masturbating, since the age of 11, was when I was 19 years old... for three months.

For many of you, this may seem sad but unremarkable: pretty much all of the guys growing up in the church I've talked to either didn't care/believe these things, or they had incredibly similar struggles.

---

Let's talk about lust then.

Here's an incredibly complex, simple question: *how do you distinguish between sexual desire and lust?*

Or in other words, what is the difference between sexual desire (the kind Christianity labels as moral) and lust (what Christianity labels as immoral)?

[This article](#) does a great job of explaining the definition of lust I grew up with:

If we want to overcome lust, we need to recognize what we are dealing with. A good

place to start is to understand the “sexual buzz”—the electric feeling of pleasure that makes sex so enjoyable. The psychobiologic sexual buzz involves our emotions, our bodies, and our cognitive functions. God designed these feelings for good. The sexual buzz occupies an essential role as an early phase of intimacy within the sexual union of marriage. Without it, we would not become aroused and sex probably would not happen enough to keep reproduction going or marital ties binding. The sexual buzz is only appropriate inside the marriage relationship.

When we misuse this capacity—allowing ourselves an illicit sexual buzz—it is sinful lust. Consider the following definition as a way to understand this:

Sexual lust—the illicit sexual buzz—is willfully allowing pleasurable gratification of wrongfully directed sexual desire that takes place deep inside.

So in other words, sexual desire directed towards your spouse is not lust, but sexual desire directed towards not-your-spouse is lust.

This is an incredibly dangerous definition.

*Why?*

Because in this formulation sexual desire and lust are *conflated*. The feelings, the base desires, are viewed as the same, the only difference is *whom* they’re being directed towards.

*But why is that dangerous? How are they being conflated if there is a distinction being drawn?*

Because the distinction is being drawn at *too high of a level of cognition*.

To grossly (and imprecisely) simplify some neuroscience, our brains have layers to them: the innermost components (sometimes termed the ‘old brain’) are most similar to other animals and regulate basic survival instincts; around that we have the cerebral cortex which enables much of our higher-level thinking (e.g. abstraction, memory, thought, etc). That distinction is important because many of our base survival instincts, such as our fight-or-flight response, don’t possess the same higher-order reasoning of our cerebral cortex even if they are connected.

For instance, trauma can deeply embed itself into this older region of the brain (particularly the hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex), and become triggered even when, logically, there is no actual threat. As an example, many PTSD survivors will

suffer extreme anxiety, flashbacks, and act irrationally when loud noises occur: even if the cause of the loud noise is rationally known to be benign. In other words, their brain deeply internalized the idea that loud noises are *bad*; the affected area of the brain doesn't have the sophistication to realize that such noises are now safe once they are back home.

So when the church teaches that lust is fundamentally bad, and has an unmarried individual constantly fighting, repressing, and fearing it *but* never practically distinguishes it from sexual desire, than you get into dangerous territory. For if 'battling' lust becomes too intense, if it becomes traumatic, and the belief that sexual desire is dangerous becomes deeply embedded, that individual's brain may very likely retain that belief even into a marriage.

On their wedding bed their higher-level, conscious thought may be "*this is ok, I'm married now,*" but the old brain feels the same desire, the same emotion, it has battled for years: and so it goes into fight-or-flight mode.

After years of struggling to fight their sexual desire to reach this moment pure, they find themselves experiencing panic attacks, disassociation, severe emotional distress, and a dozen other symptoms associated with trauma. And most sadly, from the anecdotal evidence I've observed, the ones who experience this the most intensely are exactly those who most sincerely believed the church's teachings *for they were the ones who fought against lust the hardest.*

---

Let's step back a bit... I know an unmarried, non-Christian couple who have been faithfully together for over 20 years, are they in a constant state of lust? What distinguishes them from a married, Christian couple? A piece of paper? A ceremony? A lack of commitment before God? Then would all married non-Christians be constantly lusting as well?

Morality is never black and white – even the morality surrounding something as egregious as murder is oftentimes complicated (is murder moral to save a life? Save ten lives? A thousand lives?). I believe it's a huge red flag whenever a moral system gives you easy answers to complicated situations.

After some deeper investigation it becomes obvious that such a simple definition of lust is meaningless practically and lacks any sufficient form of Biblical defense. So then why

does it exist? Here are two theories I have:

- It is an easy definition. It's simple to reason about and removes pretty much any uncertainty with regards to the morality of certain acts.
- It goes hand-in-hand with the church's theology of abstinence. It's much easier to teach abstinence if you label all sexual desire outside of marriage as a sin.

As I've personally explored this topic, I've come to the conclusion that the church's teaching on lust reflects the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, Origen, and Augustine much more than anything you will find in the Bible.

Originally, I had another 3 pages going into defining objectification, how it relates with my own personal definition of lust, and what you find in the Bible, but it got way too in-depth and off-topic for my point here (for those interested [this](#) is a good starting point).

Think about your own definition of lust: does it make coherent sense? Where do you derive it from? Do the critiques I've raised here apply to it?

---

OK, hopefully those points have resonated with some of you, but overall (especially the last point) might have felt exaggerated or semantic... So let me connect the two previous critiques to a larger theme in Christian culture:

*I essentially never had a positive interaction with sex growing up besides talks of a hypothetical future day when I would become married and sex would be a divine experience.*

Over anything else, this needs to be clear. As a young person growing up in the church, the stance towards sexuality is *overwhelmingly* negative and shame-ridden.

So much of this negativity is underneath the surface that it's hard to even put words to it. But let me put it this way: as a *second grader* I thought sex was a sin. I distinctly remember figuring out some vague idea of sex as touching a partner while naked, and thinking to myself: "Wow, it's so sad that when you get married you sleep next to each other but can never have sex. That sounds really difficult." I legitimately believed that for years until I actually had the 'talk'. So, even as a young child, before I was taught anything about sex or intimacy, my surrounding Christian culture implicitly taught me that such things were sinful.

The church tries to make up for this negativity by presenting a light at the end of the

tunnel: “*But once you’re married, sex is AMAZING!*” However, this simply makes the problem worse: now people have completely unrealistic expectations for sex alongside their total ignorance for how to have a healthy sex life.

So the wedding day comes – oftentimes far earlier than what would’ve occurred had they been free to have sex – and the couple is left disenchanting, confused, and hurt when the experience does not live up to expectations. Even worse, because there never was a space to talk about such things, the couple now quietly struggles through their sexual issues without any community support while believing that their experience is an anomaly.

Or, they ‘slip up’ outside of marriage, and experience the same problems in addition to the shame that the Christian community projects on them for failing to remain pure.

---

When I was 20 I came to the personal conclusion that sex outside of marriage could be healthy and moral (I’ll get to that in a bit). At 21, I began therapy for a few reasons: some which had to do with how my body had reacted after I did become sexually active. Here is a rant that I wrote down about 7 months after beginning therapy:

So what am I to do as a boy of 11? I have all of these raging hormones, but I’m in a community that teaches me only shame about sex; I learn everything from Google, I learn everything from *porn* because my own family and community are too insecure and shame-filled to talk about it; then I am told that I have no outlet for sexual desire, that any release is lust; I am not taught to regulate my body, I am taught to *repress it*, I am implicitly taught that any interaction with that part of me as an unmarried individual is *wrong* and *evil...* and for the next 8 years I don’t have sex, but I constantly struggle off and on with masturbation in cycles of not caring, to shame, to feeling empowered by God, to feeling confused, to hating myself, to feeling enraged at God, to feeling hopeless, and back and forth and back and forth; my first real opportunity to have sex comes when I’m 17, I tear myself away from it: I drive home crying; my mind obsesses over that moment for days to come; more opportunities come to the same end result; my mind and body feel split, completely at odds with one another; I have no way to practically interact with my sexuality, this beautiful aspect of who I am, in any positive manner.

...

So why am I surprised when, even after my beliefs have changed, my first sexual encounter comes with a person I trust and love, but my body panics, and I end up on

the ground violently shaking and crying?

...

Why am I surprised when I think back to that moment later and feel this indescribable *rage* and *hatred* towards myself and towards my body for what it feels even when my conscious mind thinks what I'm doing is fine?

...

Why am I surprised when I think of the word 'sex', my body repulses, when my friends casually discuss the ups and downs of their sex lives part of me pulls back, threatened by the security and comfort they have with themselves when I have always been split in two by the beliefs I hold... no, I have been split in two by beliefs I *used to hold*.

...

I start consistently seeing someone. Eventually I grow comfortable enough to have sex. The experience itself is wonderful, but afterwards I get hit by those same onslaught of emotions.

...

Now that I have a partner, I make it a goal to work through this. Yet, things continue to grow worse. The emotions continue to overwhelm me... I find myself shaking and sobbing on the morning after every sexual encounter I have with no real idea why. My body doesn't function properly: I additionally develop a deep insecurity towards my own ability to perform.

...

I talk with a therapist and they tell me that I show all the symptoms of trauma. Yet, I reject that diagnosis: *"surely calling my upbringing traumatic would be hyperbolic if not completely inaccurate."*

...

My feeling of internal hatred grows worse, my performance anxiety increases, nights in a row are spent falling asleep to a damp pillow.

...

My partner and I begin discussing things more in depth. One day, sitting in a car watching the sunset in one of my favorite childhood spots, I talk about my experience with sexuality growing up in the church. Afterwards, they ask me: *"Are you not listening to yourself? How would you call that anything but sexual trauma?"* I instantly break down into their arms.

...

I say the words to myself for the first time: ***"purity culture sexually traumatized me"***. It feels important to say those words. It feels like finally identifying something that has

haunted me for years.

...

Only now do I begin to see real progress. I'm able to accept what the root problem is, my therapy becomes more targeted, the panic attacks stop, and my performance issues slowly dissipate. Surprisingly, a number of other seemingly-unrelated insecurities also start disappearing at the same time.

...

After months of work, I am finally learning to be ok with myself again. I feel a level of confidence and security that I have never felt before. I had no idea how deeply and profoundly the teachings about sex growing up scarred me. Even now, phantoms still remain: certain scenarios will trigger me and send my progress backwards. I know it'll take years before I fully recover, but at least now I understand the root cause... I *will* slowly but surely work through this.

The intentions of my parents and community may not have been malicious, but the effect of their teachings was textbook sexual trauma.

We are all complicated. I have a number of friends who, by all accounts, should have had similar stories to my own but experienced zero struggles once they became sexually active. I have a number of friends who have stories vastly worse than my own. Regardless, purity culture has left a long long trail of scarred individuals and couples behind it if you're brave enough to start asking.

---

The ironic part is, purity culture seems to do shockingly little towards actually keeping people abstinent before marriage. Studies ranging from the early 2000s to the present (e.g. General Social Survey, National Survey of Family Growth, and numerous independent surveys) consistently show that, on average, Christians have nearly identical rates of having sex out of marriage compared to other demographics. The main differences? Well, Christians on average will lose their virginity a few months later in life (around 17-18), and have *far* higher rates of unprotected sex and, as a result, unwanted pregnancies.

*I will mention here – though I encourage you to look up these studies yourself – that as responders get increasingly religious (I would tentatively put myself and most of you in the upmost category) extra-marital sex rates do show more significant declines. But even among those groups, rates of sex outside of marriage still hovers around 60%, which is a lot I than higher than myself, and probably many of you, would expect.*



To quote one smaller study which summarizes these things well:

Research on the effect of the purity pledge indicated a slight delay (12 to 18 months) in the onset of sexual activity, a reduced use of contraception when young persons did engage in intercourse, and a significant increase in shame, condemnation, and self-loathing (McClintock 2001, 30; SIECUS 2005). Donna Freitas, in her groundbreaking book *Sex and the Soul*, interviewed over 2,500 students at public, Catholic, and evangelical Christian colleges around the United States about their sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. “Of all the students I interviewed at all three types of institutions,” she writes, “the only students who spoke of pregnancy scares and having unprotected sex came from the evangelical colleges. Katrina Tan, [an evangelical student] who also had a pregnancy scare, confirms this tendency, which is supported by statistics about Christian students, who are more likely to delay sex, yes, but when they do engage in sex, they are more likely to have unprotected sex” (Freitas 2008, 124–5).

And if you don't trust these 'secular' studies, then I would highly encourage you to read [The Great Sex Rescue by Sheila Gregoire](#). Sheila and her co-authors, active Christians with a large following in the Christian sex and marriage space, wanted to better understand the negative effects of Christian teachings on sex and marriage that they had observed for years. They surveyed over 20,000 Christian women regarding the teachings of many popular Christian sex and marriage books (*their process of actually crafting the survey is fascinating, I would recommend listening to [this podcast](#) which goes in-depth into this*) and found that these teachings led women to be:

- **More likely** to not trust their spouse.
- **More likely** to have mismatched sex drives.
- **Less likely** to have sex that was mutually pleasurable.
- **More likely** to have sex that was painful.
- **More likely** that their marriage will end in divorce.

I want to emphasize that these authors *don't* hold more 'progressive' views on sex, and don't critique purity culture as a whole. The solutions they propose are completely compatible with traditional Christian doctrines. So I hope that even if you disagree with everything else I say here, that this book could be useful to you.

---

But personally, I don't think these authors go far enough. I received one of the healthiest

abstinence-affirming upbringings that I've heard of in the church, and it still led to years of immense pain and suffering in my own life.

In my opinion, at the root of the problem is this:

- We develop our sex drive on average around 10-12
- Our brains don't fully develop until we're 25

That means that, according to a very reasonable standard, most Christians endure around 13-15 years of abstinence until they're old enough to get married, and, even among the most early-marriage-progressive among you all, that number is at least 6-7 years. The Gospel Coalition author, Shane Morris, echoes this sentiment:

Without the “easy out” of premarital sex and cohabitation, Christian young people often find themselves in a struggle to keep themselves for a honeymoon that could be a decade or more away. The average age for marriage among American men is now 29. For women it's 27. This means churches are asking Christian students to spend, on average, 15 years fighting the strongest hormones of their lives. It's an expectation no previous generation of believers has faced.

I think Shane summarizes the problem well: “fighting the strongest hormones of their lives”. Complete abstinence until marriage demands exactly that: fighting, struggle, and repression. I've given it far too much thought, “*could I have still remained abstinent but not experienced the trauma that I did?*”, and the honest conclusion I've come to is... no. I don't see any way for myself that I would've followed those teachings with the same earnestness that I did and come out unscathed. You can't spend a decade repressing your sex drive and expect things to work normally all of a sudden; it doesn't make common sense, and it certainly doesn't make sense from what we understand of neurology.

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Of course, these are my thoughts *after* the fact. But how did I originally come to the conclusion that abstinence wasn't a Biblical teaching? It all started off with a basic question that I couldn't answer:

*“Why would God make humans with such strong sexual urges only to impose such restrictive rules on them?”*

No sin in Christianity was so universally compelling, undeniably natural, and unusually constrained. Unlike sins like murder, greed, and gluttony which were unambiguously

wrong, sexual activity was labeled as an amazing gift... with a giant asterisk.

When I asked other Christians this question, I almost always received some generic answer like, “well it’s because of the Fall.” But I found such answers incredibly unsatisfying: what was because of the Fall? What actually happened to ‘corrupt’ our natural sexual inclinations? What could sexuality have looked like before the Fall? I generally received three types of responses:

1. Some – not very many – took a similar position to a number of early church Fathers, e.g., Augustine, Jerome, Clement, Tertullian, etc.: sexual desire itself was introduced in the Fall and is fundamentally sinful; abstinence is to be preferred but, if one cannot do that, then marriage is second-best. I am not going to waste space pushing back on this as a plausible explanation mainly because most Evangelicals don’t hold this view + it’s so far removed from my own experience of the world to even have a spark of truth + in my opinion, it’s rather hard to refute from a strictly Biblical perspective.
2. The second opinion is summarized well by Matthew VanLuik in another Gospel Coalition article:

Sexuality is a powerful emotion through which men and women become attracted to each other. It is a wonderful gift by which a boy and girl seek each other and desire to become one. But when sin entered the world, this gift became distorted, so that people used it to satisfy their own sinful passions rather than seeking to serve their spouse out of love.

This is a nice-sounding explanation – sexual desire itself isn’t bad, just when we use it for our own selfish desires – but it makes little sense as best I can understand it (plus it doesn’t really imply abstinence at all). The author seems to claim that a person selfishly desiring sexual fulfillment is a sinful passion, while simultaneously claiming that another party receiving sexual fulfillment is good – that they are ‘served’ – *but that other party must desire sexual fulfillment in order for it to ‘serve’ them*. In other words, the author attempts to argue that the motivation for sex pre-Fall was selfless, but it seems impossible to remove self-interest from the equation. By its very definition, in order for something to be pleasurable someone must want it.

3. By far the most common answer was simply, “I have no idea.” And honestly? I respect that. Perhaps we simply have no mechanism for imagining a reality so fundamentally different from our own. However, “I have no idea” isn’t a very strong

foundation for a belief with such massive implications.

I'd encourage you to think about this question: how would you answer it? What does uncorrupted sexuality look like in Christian belief?

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Needless to say, none of the answers I received were very satisfying to me. Furthermore, none of them helped me address my second, much more fundamental, question:

*"Why would two consenting individuals having sex outside of marriage be wrong?"*

In other words, even if sexuality was somehow 'broken', why did marriage fix the problem?

Unlike pretty much any other sin, it seemed really really hard to give a logical argument for abstinence. Most arguments dealt with extremes, made incredibly broad assumptions about how people were, or contained toxic implications for how love worked. To me, the most compelling arguments contended that there was a spiritual aspect to sex which we didn't understand, and thus, we couldn't come up with rational reasons for why abstinence was important. But even that explanation felt weak, partially for the same reason as (3) from above, but also because I simply knew more exceptions than examples: individuals and couples who witnessed only positive effects after having sex outside of marriage.

*(On the topic of experiential evidence, Christians will oftentimes point out that, statistically, people who have more sexual partners outside of marriage are more likely to get divorced. However, to me this point isn't incredibly compelling, mainly because [those with fewer partners are much more likely to be religious](#), and I think it's pretty obvious to see why being religious correlates with a smaller likelihood of divorce)*

Since I couldn't come up with much support from example or logic, this naturally led me to wonder: *"Where in the Bible do you even support the idea that extramarital sex is wrong?"*

... and so I went on a deep dive to better understand where the doctrine of abstinence came from.

TLDR it's very complicated and not at all straightforward as most believe. For the sake of brevity, I'll summarize at a high-level and simply drop references for those who want to explore further.

The Bible never directly states something like, “sex outside of marriage is wrong,” but instead, uses catch-all phrases which we translate today as “sexual immorality”. In the the New Testament (which I’ll limit this section too – it’s a similar story for the Old Testament), that catch-all phrase for illicit sexual acts is the Greek πορνεία (porneia).

[Here is a definition of porneia from an abstinence-affirming source:](#)

*Porneia* is a Greek word that essentially means “illicit sexual activity.” It is a general, inclusive word for any kind of sexual immorality and occurs about 25 times in the New Testament.

...

The word [porneia] does not specify which kinds of sexual activity are immoral; however, since the rest of Scripture defines any sexual activity outside of marriage as off-limits, it would all be considered *porneia*.

Notice that the article doesn’t provide any verses to back up its claim that Scripture defines any sexual activity outside of marriage as off-limits, because, *they don’t exist*.

Really the only passage which comes even remotely close to stating this is 1 Corinthians 7:2, which recommends marriage as a way to avoid ‘porneia’. But again, what is ‘porneia’ in this context? The most straightforward answer seems to be incest or prostitution because, earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul explicitly mentions those things as the ‘porneia’ the Corinthians were struggling with.

So the critical question is, does ‘porneia’ include extramarital sex? This question has been explored and debated for years, but scholarship at this point essentially agrees that simply translating it simply as ‘extramarital sex’ lacks necessary nuance. One of the more influential scholars in this area, historian Kyle Harper, has written a few books on sexuality in early Christianity that have, to my knowledge, been relatively well-received by both Christians and non-Christians (for example, [here is a Gospel Coalition article](#) which uses his research to argue for the doctrine of abstinence). He made waves in 2011 when he published the paper, [Porneia: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm](#), where he attempts to answer the question of what the NT authors actually meant when they used ‘porneia’. I’d encourage you to read the entire thing yourself – it’s not an easy read, but is excellently written and very informative. If you want something easier to read, [here is an article](#) that uses the paper to argue against abstinence.

*(If you recall, way earlier I linked a paper on the sexual use of slaves in Jewish/Greco-Roman cultures. It is a response to Harper’s work here so it makes the most sense to read this paper*

*before that one.)*

As a summary, here is the conclusion of Harper's paper:

The category of πορνεία is the cornerstone of a distinctly Christian sexual morality. The usual translations—"fornication" and "sexual immorality"—reflect the breadth and flexibility of the term's meaning, but they obscure its actual content and connotations. I have argued that, to understand what the word could mean in various ancient texts, it is necessary to appreciate both the many strata of textual meaning that accrued over the centuries and the ever-present influence of social structure on ancient sexual morality. The pervasive misunderstanding of the classical meaning of πορνεία has obscured the radicalism of Judeo-Christian πορνεία. Classical πορνεία was the act of selling oneself, not a whole class of actions categorized as immoral. Jewish and Christian πορνεία could evoke the whole array of extramarital sex acts of which Greek and Roman culture approved. The word πορνεία so effectively and so dramatically condensed the differences between pre-Christian and Christian sexuality that it requires some effort to reenter the sexual culture of the Mediterranean at a time when sexual norms were immanent in patterns of social reproduction. Πορνεία is indeed extramarital sex—but Christian "fornication" developed amid a society where the legitimacy of heterosexual contact was determined not by the presence or absence of marriage so much as the status of the woman involved.

In other words, throughout the paper (and his books) Harper demonstrates how distinct Jewish/Christian sexual morality was when compared to the surrounding culture. *But*, as a result, attempting to extrapolate 'porneia' to the modern-day is incredibly difficult, precisely because the word was used to *contrast* with the Greco-Roman sexual culture that is incredibly different from the modern-day. So what it really means for us now is unclear.

What is clear, however, is that the New Testament writers most definitely were not talking about the modern idea of a romantic extramarital relationship. That *doesn't mean* that these writers would have agreed with such a practice, it just means that directly applying these verses to this practice requires further justification.

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Normally, if a topic isn't completely clear in the Scriptures, Christians will look to how the early church fathers understood it for guidance.

And, in fact, we *do* see the church fathers teaching that extramarital sex is wrong. However, simply stopping there would misrepresent these teachings. Generally speaking – there’s of course variation here – the early church fathers taught that sex was only admissible for procreation, sexual pleasure itself was sinful, and abstinence was a higher calling than marriage (read a passages like [1 Corinthians 7](#) and it’s fairly clear why they thought that way). They taught that sex was only acceptable during marriage because they believed that marriage was the God-ordained institution for raising a family (remember sex had to be procreative).

The teachings of the (Evangelical) church do *not* align with this. While it does teach abstinence before marriage, it also teaches – with some denominational exceptions – that sex doesn’t have to be for procreative, that sexual pleasure within marriage isn’t sinful, and that marriage + family is the ideal Christian lifestyle.

In other words, while the church fathers’ doctrine of abstinence does coincide with the (Evangelical) church’s, they differ drastically on the rationale behind that doctrine.

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To summarize, I stopped believing that extra-marital sex was necessarily immoral because:

- Logically, experientially, scientifically, and statistically it appeared to have little discernible benefits and extremely severe consequences
  - Its support in the Bible seemed deeply connected to the culture at the time of writing and lacking to non-existent for the modern-day
  - Its support in the early church fathers’ teachings was predicated on beliefs that most Evangelicals disagreed with
- 

Of all the things people leave the church for, in my experience sex and sexuality are at the top of the list. Before I left home for college a mentor warned me that sex was a powerful temptation which leads many to forsake their beliefs. I distinctly remember how they laughed wryly and said:

Usually when I have someone come back home from college and mention they’re having doubts or not going to church anymore I ask, “So when did you start having sex?”

I don’t know if this person ever actually asked that or if it was simply a joke, but that

statement bothered me for years. I was recently talking to a friend who grew up in an incredibly similar church to my own and fit the description of the 'someone' mentioned in the statement: they ended up also changing their views on abstinence and leaving their home church, but did not leave the faith and are now happily married. I asked them what they thought of my mentor's passing comment:

Ugh. Where to start?

If your first thought is to de-legitimize the doubts of the person confiding in you, you're being a pretty shitty mentor. If you really believe that people's beliefs are so shallow that a simple pleasure will lead them to give up their entire worldview you either have an incredibly poor view of their character or what they believe in.

A statement like that perfectly reflects the church's insecurity on the doctrine of abstinence. It has such poor answers to serious doubts surrounding it that, instead of addressing those doubts when they arise, it simply gaslights whoever has them: "You're not really doubting whether the doctrine is true: you just want to have sex really badly."

The church bastardizes legitimate struggle and doubt, painting it as if the person is desiring sin too much when in reality *they're just questioning an ill-supported belief with huge ramifications*. The problem is that, when we frame things like this, the person feels completely isolated: their doubt is cast as a moral failure instead of an authentic, healthy examination of their beliefs.

So no, I did not leave my church because sex was that great. The extreme restrictions surrounding sex led to doubt, and, when I became most vulnerable with my questions, the church shamed me and pushed me away to prop up a distorted version of myself that made it easy to avoid any actual engagement with the reasoning behind my doubt. So I left.

The church's treatment of sex and sexuality is terribly broken. It takes shockingly little effort to find people deeply hurt by the sexual culture of the church. I've personally carried the scars from my upbringing for years.

It doesn't have to be that way. Sometimes I wonder how many people I know would still be Christians if it weren't for the church's draconian, legalistic grip on every aspect of sexuality.

I hope you can re-evaluate your beliefs on this topic.



# Doubt

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This memoir has been about doubt; how I experienced it, and where it led me.

There is a final aspect of the story left unspoken: *how others treated my doubt*.

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Before the tiniest hint of uncertainty ever slipped from my mouth, when my questions were still fledgling thoughts whispering from an unwanted corner of my mind, I had experienced years of Christian community reacting to my doubt.

For, even though I had never been the subject, all of my life I had witnessed cautionary sermons, whispered judgment, and insecure aversion directed towards others with similar questions and uncertainties.

Those experiences paralyzed me. I felt terrified to speak of my doubt to anyone else: I was afraid of becoming the subject of the treatment that I had observed for so long. However, I knew I didn't want to face these thoughts alone so, a few times, I gathered the strength to put aside my assumptions and attempt to be vulnerable.

My friends were receptive, but with many of them I felt a tangible distance form after initiating conversations about doubts – distance which simply got worse over time. Maybe my questions, and the way I eventually answered some of them, made them uncomfortable. Maybe our relationship was simply based on shared beliefs. Or maybe I changed. Regardless, a remarkable number of friendships from church slowly died once I began being more open about my doubts, and not for any lack of effort on my part.

Curiously enough, most of those relationships that are still alive today (for which I am eternally grateful for), are individuals who went through incredibly similar journeys to my own. We all ended up in different places: some still at their churches, some moving churches, some leaving church altogether, but we all have significant periods of doubt in common.

Conversations about my doubts in group settings, or with mentors generally went terribly. I received prescriptions, accusations, apologetics speeches, or nothing at all. Here's an excerpt from my journal almost three years ago:

Why, when I am simply being open about very reasonable questions I don't have answers to, do I have to keep reassuring people that I have been reading my Bible? That there is not some significant sin I am secretly committing?

Why have the last three times I've opened up with mentors led to apologetics lectures? Why, when I try to explain where I disagree, did they turn those conversations into arguments rather than discussions? Do they really think that's being helpful?

Why do we even have check-ins in home-group if, after talking for ten minutes about my struggles, I don't receive a single followup question and no-one ever brings up the topic with me again?

Why do I feel *more* isolated for being honest about my doubts? Why does it feel like my community is pushing me away when I'm reaching out for support?

Please, can someone just listen to me right now? Can't you see I'm asking for help? This is really really hard.

It didn't take very long before I stopped being vulnerable within a church context.

The treatment of my doubt was the main reason I decided to write this memoir. I simply didn't feel comfortable being honest in a conversational setting so I put my thoughts on paper.

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It was around this time that I took a year-long hiatus from church to process everything going on. Ironically enough, the first sermon I attended after the break was on doubt.

The sermon more or less consisted of four points:

- Having compassion for those experiencing doubt
- Biblical examples of faith in God during uncertain circumstances
- Doubt is sometimes a necessary evil to help you further embrace your faith
- Avoid false teachers who might cause you to doubt

I'll talk about the third point for now and the fourth in a bit.

In line with characterizing doubt as an "evil", the entire sermon had an underlying, familiar theme: *doubt is a detour, it's a temporary straying from a path that you should return to.*

I would wager that a majority of truly doubting individuals will never feel comfortable opening up in a church context if this is the underlying subtext.

Why would they? If you characterize their uncertainty negatively and express an obvious intention to simply restore the belief they are questioning, why would they expect you to hear them out? Why would they be comfortable being vulnerable when clearly you would rather them simply get back on the path?

I certainly didn't.

To add insult to injury, I would expect, at the very least, for the underlying intention in conversations surrounding doubt to be one of love. However, in my own experience – and countless others whom I've talked to about this – those conversations never felt loving. I finished the journal entry from above with:

All of these conversations feel so *defensive* – I consistently either feel pushed away or pushed against instead of being pulled in... It seems that most people care more about protecting their own beliefs, then sitting with me as I work through my own.

There is a world of difference between a loving response and a defensive one.

It was only a few weeks after that journal entry that I read Rachel Evans' *Searching For Sunday*. In so many ways the book echoed my experience:

My fellow Christian didn't want to listen to me, or grieve with me, or walk down this frightening road with me. They wanted to FIX me. They wanted to wind me up like an old fashioned toy and send me back to the fold with a painted smile on my face and tiny symbols in my hands. Looking back, I suspect their reactions had less to do with disdain for my doubt and more to do with fear of their own. As my mother tried to tell me a million times, they weren't rejecting me for being different, they were rejecting me for being familiar, or calling out all those quiet misgivings most Christians keep in the dark corners of their hearts and would rather not name.

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In hindsight, it's really not surprising to me that the church would act so defensively towards doubt; in no way is the modern-day church comfortable with ambiguity and nuance: from systematic theology to apologetics to worldview classes modern-day Evangelical institutions are hyper-focused on carefully defining and proving the correctness of their beliefs.

Doubt completely wrecks that framework. Doubt is the daughter of ambiguity and nuance.

There's nothing wrong with careful definitions and proofs (it's quite literally what I do for a living), but we are talking about *life* – not cryptography. Who would dare claim that life isn't full of uncertainty and complexity? Isn't it both naive and incredibly arrogant to pretend as if there are not significant portions of *any* worldview painted with broad strokes? How in the world do we expect to experience the small details – those subtle contradictions lost in the sweep of the brush – and not doubt?

In my opinion, living life fully necessitates doubt: exposing yourself to new ideas, people, and places will guarantee an encounter with something you can't explain. It is only through doubting your own understanding in those situations that you can learn and grow.

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To take this train of thought even further, what exactly does *faith* even mean in the absence of doubt? For, if the answer is certain, what need is there for faith? As Peter Rollins puts it:

Doubt has often been disparaged, or merely tolerated, because it is seen as leading to an inert state of undecidability in which nothing can be believed or acted upon. Yet in reality it is only in the midst of undecidability that real decisions can be made.

...

This is in no way equivalent to saying that the Christian ought to adopt a position of disinterested agnosticism – far from it. The point is only that the believer should not repress the shadow of doubt that hands over all belief (the potential lie that may dwell in the heart of every belief). Instead the believer ought to acknowledge and even celebrate the dark night of the soul, understanding that this is not a threatening darkness which conceals an enemy but rather is the intimate darkness within which we embrace our faith. For when we can say that we will follow God regardless of the uncertainty involved in such a decision, then real faith is born – for love acts not whenever a certain set of criteria has been met, but rather because it is in the nature of love to act.

*(Another reminder that Christian ≈ Evangelical unless I specifically distinguish between the two)*

For myself, and I would guess many of you here, I did not become a Christian because I

was convinced through historical evidence, philosophical arguments, or the logic of the Christian worldview. Rather, I was so compelled by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ that – far removed from any technical reasoning – I decided to place my *faith* in what He claimed even if I *couldn't* prove its correctness.

But as I grew older that statement became increasingly less true. I learned about historical evidence, scientific findings, philosophical arguments, and anecdotal accounts directly refuting other worldviews and supporting Christianity. By the time I was a teen, it legitimately seemed like Christianity was *the only* worldview that made any logical sense.

What need was there for faith anymore? I could arrive at Christianity purely through science and logic.

Without even realizing it, *the backbone of my spiritual life became less about following, trusting, and emulating the teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures, and more aligned with an intellectual defense of the modern-day Christian worldview.*

Let me explain a bit more.

Most of Jesus' ministry consists of parables, questions, and claims oftentimes delivered in unclear, symbolic language. There are few instances where his statements have an easy, straightforward understanding.

Over thousands of years, Christians have sought to bring clarity to the underlying doctrines that Jesus, and the rest of the Scriptures, teach. Evangelicalism is one particular example of that: a worldview built on specific interpretations surrounding the Bible supported by logical, historical, literary, and scientific arguments.

Inherent to being more specific, such interpretations and arguments are also more brittle, i.e., it is much easier to contradict them. Indeed, once I moved away from home and became exposed to a plethora of experiences, people, and ideas outside of my Christian bubble, my worldview very quickly began to shatter.

*And it felt like my faith began shattering alongside it.*

There was no room to step back and say, "OK. There's some problems with this interpretation or reasoning, let's go back and re-examine": practically, my faith was placed *in that interpretation and reasoning*, not in the person(s) at the source of it.

Are you following the difference here?

When my Evangelical worldview began to crumble, God Herself began crumbling away with it *because I had never learned to distinguish the two*. Instead of growing up hearing “*this is the best-effort attempt that us humans have made to understand God and how She wants us to live,*” I was taught that, “*This is who God is and what She wants for us.*”

Or to put it another way, the Evangelical worldview I grew up with was so insistent on a claim to Absolute Truth and so antagonistic to the ideas of nuance or mystery, that my ideas of God followed suit. When I uncovered uncertainties and contradictions to that claimed Truth, it felt like a contradiction in God Herself, not in the beliefs.

Don't hear me wrong, I am not claiming that Absolute Truth doesn't exist, I'm simply pointing out that *the worldview I grew up with – even the one I currently hold now – is most Absolutely not it.*

And *that's fine*, we're humans not God: we're going to get some stuff wrong, probably some fairly significant stuff. Don't many of us believe in things like total depravity? Why do we so often fool ourselves into thinking that we've interpreted more or less all the important stuff correctly? How do we look at all of the other ([apparently 45,000+](#)) Christian denominations in existence and confidently claim that God clearly revealed the Truth? Sure some of the differentiations between denominations are small, but some are very very large.

When we equate our fragile interpretations, beliefs, and worldviews with Absolute Truth – with God – I wonder how many times we end up re-enacting the quote from earlier:

We say God and You turn towards us only to realize that we have been calling over  
Your shoulder to our traditions

How many times have I reduced God to my worldview? How many times have I rejected God in order to cling to my beliefs? Probably too many to count.

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Let's briefly revisit the fourth point from the sermon about doubt I mentioned earlier:

Avoid false teachers which might cause you to doubt

For context, false teachers were being defined as any teacher whose position did not align with the church's opinion, especially, for instance, some more progressive Christian writers for whom the distinction might be difficult to ascertain. This was then used to

connect to a few verses in the Bible which warn against false teachers/prophets.

*(In my opinion, those verses are clearly referring to any actively malicious teacher: not one simply disagreeing with the author... but that's besides the point.)*

As with everything in life, at some point our personal knowledge reaches a limit and we have to depend on authority figures to give us guidance and tell us what we should believe (e.g. how we should interpret the Bible). While it perfectly makes sense to be wise in choosing which authority figures to trust, actively avoiding any such figures who disagree with your position simply encourages ignorance.

But sadly, this avoidance of alternative viewpoints seems incredibly common (not at all unique to Christianity, but especially frequent within it). When I was younger, I used to look in awe at my parent's vast collection of books. As I've grown older one fact always sticks out to me about those books: *nearly all of them echo my parent's worldview.*

If your worldview doesn't allow you to be wrong, if it doesn't give you room for uncertainty, then, naturally, you will push away anything which might create uncertainty.

---

I've had a few conversations with other Christians about this (the way the church encourages ignorance) and on multiple occasions people have pointed to [Matthew 18](#) as a response – enough times that it's worth mentioning here.

In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches that believers must become like small children in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Consequently, I've heard people argue that we should not disparage ignorance in the church (or put another way: 'simple faith') as children are ignorant and don't understand or study a wide variety of different ideas.

I agree with this response in part: not everyone has the desire or capability to deeply study certain topics and we shouldn't expect as much. But the implicit claim here, that Jesus is somehow encouraging a simple faith, I think is completely backwards. Here's an alternate interpretation for these verses I wrote awhile ago:

It is true that a small child is ignorant, but this state is not a choice: they simply haven't had the time or experience to develop any further. By no means is this ignorance their defining characteristic; in fact, children *actively* seek to escape their ignorance: constantly asking questions to better understand the world around them. Oftentimes these questions cut directly into many of the

cultural/religious/philosophical/linguistic/etc. assumptions we, as adults, take for granted, making them surprisingly difficult to answer.

To the child the world is full of magic and mystery: do you remember exploring someplace new as a child? Do you remember the rush of joy with each new discovery? The excitement as you found some secret hideaway?

So no, when I think of what it means to be like, or have faith like, a small child I don't focus on the child's ignorance as a sort of cop-out for some, rather I see it as a description of *all* of our spiritual states: when it comes to the grand scheme of things, in God's eyes we are probably all like small children, knowing very little. Rather than pretending to be adults, we should recognize how much of existence still lies in mystery and continue asking questions – questions which may challenge our most foundational assumptions – and exploring this beautiful world we live in with the same wonder and fascination that is so characteristic of children.

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All of this to say, an inability to doubt and an obsession with needing certainty in our beliefs – a fixation with *feeling* Right – negatively affects our faith. It feels so distant from this quote:

For when we can say that we will follow God regardless of the uncertainty involved in such a decision, then real faith is born – for love acts not whenever a certain set of criteria has been met, but rather because it is in the nature of love to act.

Or:

A faith that can only exist in the light of victory and certainty is one which really affirms the self while pretending to affirm Christ.

...

Only a genuine faith can embrace doubt, for such a faith does not act because of a self-interested reason (such as fear of hell or desire for heaven) but acts simply because it must.

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I went on this somewhat-long tirade because, as the Western church goes through a phase where terms like “deconstruction” have become common-place and church membership is falling faster than any other time in recent history, it seems that the



church is missing the point.

Far too many articles I've read on this topic from Christian perspectives point fingers at the individuals leaving the church or the surrounding, secular culture. While those things are certainly aspects of the current moment, I think much more serious thought needs to be directed towards how the church itself has contributed to where we are.

While I believe there are a number of things at the core of the problem, in the space above I've tried to discuss one thing which seems to rarely get attention. To summarize my points:

**The *Evangelical Worldview* has become a huge idol within the communities I grew up in. We focus so heavily on demonstrating the correctness of that worldview, that our faith has lost its proper direction; in our pride, we've elevated our own *human* opinions to the status of Absolute Truth, hide ourselves from other ways of thinking, and have utterly forgotten how to be wrong or how to doubt. We have so strongly aligned ourselves with conformity of belief that we implicitly – and oftentimes explicitly – push away anything which doesn't conform: including individuals who may be questioning aspects of their faith.**

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Please take time to think seriously about this issue. I think *many* people who left the church would still happily be there if it weren't for the church's adverse reaction to their doubt.

As humans we have to recognize that *we probably don't have everything right* with regards to many aspects of our beliefs. Thus, when we're confronted with someone who might be questioning their beliefs, the *first* action should be one of support – not evangelism. We can be honest in claiming what we believe to be right, but push our own self-interest aside and help them to work through their questions, perhaps even in ways that contradict our own view; all the while having faith in God that She will work through whatever happens.

If you find yourself unable to do this, ask yourself: why? Is it because I care about this person so much that I can't stand to see them go down a path I think is wrong? Or does something about their questions threaten me?

It goes without saying that, by practicing this, you might watch someone fall away from the faith. But rather than isolating them, you will be walking with them through that

process as a friend, and I would argue that the latter has a much more powerful, lasting effect.

## Vapor

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In Spring of 2020 I wrote a song about much of what I've written in this memoir. I've posted some of the lyrics below: I think they add an emotional dimension which can't quite be captured within standard writing.

The song begins with:

*Vapor still chasing the wind  
Sonderous breeze*

*Unfaithful, abhorred, lukewarm, weak, conformed  
Describe my belief*

*Oh what can I say beloved?  
I can finally Be*

*But the less I agree  
The less you want me  
Do I fight or fake peace?*

*How to stand my ground?  
When all I have is doubts?*

*What I'm experiencing  
Can't be fucking unique*

*Why is a mirror all I see?*

And ends with:

*So have I lost my way?  
Have I given up my faith?  
Hopelessly gone astray?*

*Contriving truth?*

*Who fucking knows*

*But there's something beautiful*

*Embracing the unknown*

*Teaching me to let go*

*To come away and just behold*

[Here's a random excerpt](#) of me singing the ending I recorded back a little over two years ago now.

## Just Behold

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There's so much more I wanted to say in this memoir: right now I have 5 additional pages of outlines for topics, and another 40 pages of writing... But at some point I realized I just needed to send this – two years of silence is far too long.

While much of my writing has centered frustration, uncertainty, conflict, and struggle, know that – even through all of that – I feel immense gratitude for the Christian community I grew up in and the faith that you all taught and demonstrated to me. You were intentional, uplifting, nurturing, and loving: you constantly pushed me to grow, and provided wise guidance on how to do so. Most significantly, you taught me to constantly center my life around Christianity, at its core one of the most beautiful, challenging, accurate, and transformative explanations for this crazy world we exist in.

It is precisely because of my sincere love for the church and the people in it that I chose to invest this much time into writing my thoughts.

*Part of me longed to be understood by the people I love.*

*Part of me felt compelled to challenge beliefs I thought were harmful.*

*Part of me hoped that some might resonate with what I've written here and feel a little less alone as they question the faith they grew up with.*

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Leaving home meant leaving the bubble – the wonderful community I grew up in – behind. It forced exposure to the ‘other’ and put my own ideology to the test.

And my ideology failed. There was an edge case, an unanswered question, an inconsistency, a contradiction, and another and another and another. I looked more closely: I found assumptions that didn’t make sense.

So I let them go.

And I started over.

This memoir, with a few small exceptions, only covers up until August 2020 – the letting go.

“Letting go” – it sounds poetic, painless... it really was more like “tearing out”. It involved shame, hurt, anger, and fear. It led to a complete loss of what I called community. It led to a complete loss of the scaffolding which held the world up around me.

**But.**

It was worth it.

I overcame those feelings, built new community, and erected stronger scaffolding. I healed old wounds, learned to navigate the world in healthier ways, and grew a *lot* in the process.

But that’s a story for another time.

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*So I will keep challenging my understanding of the world,*

*and the way I live.*

*I will remain vigilant in doubting.*

*My beliefs will change.*

*Many will be wrong.*

*But, if it’s genuine,*

*How could whatever – whoever – it is that we call God,*

*Do anything but run besides me in that pursuit?*

-Ryan