

Growing into Unbelief

Bart Ehrman

As I continued to go to church in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I found that I simply believed less and less of the Christian tradition in anything like a literal sense.

Was God the creator? Well, maybe in some kind of ultimate sense, but not literally. The universe was billions of years old, it came into being at the Big Bang, it has been expanding ever since, and the reaches of space – with its unfathomable numbers of galaxies each with billions of stars – as surely not “created” by a being principally concerned with a form of life that happened to evolve on one small planet circling one relatively small star, one of many, many billions in one relatively small galaxy. The human-centeredness of the view of “creation” did not, at the end of the day, really make sense to me.

And God himself? Did he exist? Yes, I thought he did. But I wasn’t sure we could possibly know much if anything about him. I assumed he was somehow in some sense connected with the world, but I wasn’t sure how. I assumed he wanted me to behave and live in certain ways. I assumed that the great moral values of human society – happiness, virtue, love of others, giving of oneself for the sake of others – all these things manifested God’s will in the world. But I also had come to think that whatever God was, he was far beyond what we with our limited intelligence could possibly conceptualize or understand.

Was Jesus the son of God? Well, maybe in some sense: he showed us what “God” (the ultimate reality) was ultimately concerned about. Jesus’ apocalyptic teaching was valuable because it affirmed that there are forces in the world that have to be fought against, forces of evil that create poverty, hunger, oppression, injustice, war, birth defects, natural disasters, and so on. All of these problems are bigger than the humans that cause or experience them. Jesus had seen that better than anyone. And Jesus’ life was a model for others, a life of giving of himself for the sake of others.

But the more I thought about that, I wondered if it was really true. In church I continued to take communion every Sunday, by explaining it to myself in a non-literal way. Jesus gave his life for others. By standing in the Christian tradition I was affirming that I believed we should give our lives for others. But really? First of all, did Jesus really give his life voluntarily? Wasn’t he, in fact, condemned to death for making some outrageous claims about himself, calling himself the Jewish “king” when everyone knew that the Romans were in charge of the Promised Land, and no Jewish king would be allowed? Wasn’t he executed summarily by the Romans for political reasons? Historically he didn’t think he was dying for the sins of the world. He was executed for claiming to be the future ruler of Israel – not a ruler thousands of years later, but in his own lifetime. And he was obviously wrong about that.

Moreover, am I myself really willing to die for others? Maybe for my wife and children. But for anyone else? Really? Is that how I want to spend my life, looking for an opportunity to die for people I don’t even know? Is that the model for how I should live?

Did I believe in a Holy Spirit? No, not really. I didn’t think the Spirit had inspired the Bible and certainly didn’t think he guided believers in how to think and live. Even now, today, I have people tell me all the time that I can’t interpret the Bible correctly because I’m not guided by the Spirit. The idea is that only those who are Spirit-led can understand the Spirit-inspired word of God. But is that true? If Spirit-filled

interpreters are given the “right” understanding of the Bible, why is it that Spirit-filled interpreters all have *different* interpretations that are completely at odds with one another?

I saw that already back when I was a fundamentalist. Just before I went off to study at Moody Bible Institute, I had joined a charismatic community that believed that the gifts of the Spirit were still available to believers today, that if you were “baptized in the Spirit” (after having been baptized in water) you would “receive the Spirit” and could manifest spiritual gifts. In particular, if you did that, you could speak in tongues, praying in foreign languages that you didn’t know (and usually that no one else knew either). And I did. I received the Spirit and I spoke in tongues. Did it regularly.

Then I went to Moody, where the professors all believed, of course, in the Holy Spirit, but were also convinced, as non-charismatics, that the Spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues were no longer available and were now no longer necessary. They were designed to help the church in the interim period between Jesus’ death and the writing of the Bible, to provide authoritative revelations from God until his ultimate revelation had come to be produced. But now that we have the Bible, we no longer have or need the gifts of the Spirit. Many of my professors believed that the charismatic gifts were in fact deceptions of the devil.

So the Spirit-filled leaders of the charismatic community back home had one set of views, that they claimed were from God, based on their interpretation of the Bible, and my Spirit-filled professors at college had the opposite set of views, which they claimed were from God, based on their interpretation of the Bible. One claimed that a set of experiences and practices were from God; the other claimed that these same experiences and practices were from the Devil. What is the evidence to suggest that those filled with the Spirit are the ones who truly understand the Bible, that without the Spirit, no one can understand the Bible?

By the time I was a liberal Christian in the late 80s and early 90s these debates about charismatic gifts were all very much in the past for me. I certainly didn’t believe in the spiritual gifts any more, and didn’t think that the devil inspired these gifts. Neither one. And I didn’t think that the Spirit guided the understanding of Scripture. For that you needed scholarship – or at least you needed to know someone who could tell you what experts had to say.

In short, what did I believe, about God, about Christ, about the Spirit? What did I believe that any non-Christian couldn’t believe? Why, in effect, should I remain a Christian?