

A Theological Odyssey: The Story of My Deconversion from Christianity

(by Ed Morris, last updated 2/16/2024)

1) Background

I was raised in a very devotedly Plymouth Brethren family, the second oldest of eight siblings. As I look back over my long voyage out of Christianity, I can't help but think how this major component of my upbringing must have substantially shaped not only how I came to be so deeply indoctrinated into the faith, but also how my thinking had to so drastically evolve before I could finally leave it all behind. So I will begin my story with a brief explanation of what this little-known, totally unofficial denomination or family of denominations is all about.

The Plymouth Brethren, or simply "Brethren" for short, are fairly typically evangelical in their basic theology and understanding of salvation. Depending on the particular branch or sub-denomination, they range from moderately fundamentalist to extremely fundamentalist in their specific interpretations of the Bible and the strictures and traditions they see it as implying for everyday life. But what really sets them apart from other evangelicals, even in the case of the usually much less fundamentalist "open" branch that I will mostly be describing here, is the unconventional way they view and conduct their church services. For one thing, Brethren "assemblies," which is what they typically call their congregations, are not generally led by paid, seminary-educated ministers or pastors, nor do they usually even designate anyone as their main or official preacher. Instead, the more capable "brothers" (and often even the less capable) either take turns or otherwise share in the preaching duties for their Family Bible Hours or other evangelistic or teaching services. It's their worship services, however, or "breaking of bread meetings" as they usually call them, that are especially unique. For these meetings, which they traditionally consider to be the most important part of church, they do not assign anyone to preach or take the lead at all, but instead leave the proceedings completely up to "the leading of the Holy Spirit," despite their otherwise very non-charismatic theology. This means there is no preselected music or order of events, but rather the men of the congregation (but not the women) can freely say a prayer, announce a hymn for the congregation to sing, or share a thought or scripture that they feel the Lord "putting on their heart" at any time. In practice, this often results in gaps of silence for several minutes or more between anyone saying anything at all, especially in the smaller and more traditional congregations. But this is not considered a bad thing, since the overall tone of these meetings is generally rather somber and reflective anyway, with the main purpose being to "remember the Lord in his death." They have their own hymnbooks specially curated for this theme, and most of the hymns are entirely unknown outside of their own circles. Women are traditionally expected to wear symbolic head-coverings in the church services—usually small, doily-like pieces of lacy fabric—though many of the comparatively more progressive congregations found only in the open branch have largely discarded this practice.

This somewhat culty-feeling way of doing church began as a nondenominational movement in Dublin, Ireland, in the late 1820s. The most influential of its founding fathers was a former Anglican clergyman named John Nelson Darby, who is also generally credited as being the father

of dispensationalism. Most Christians today, if they're even familiar with the concept of dispensationalism at all, know it primarily for its more sensational view of the "rapture" and "end times" than other theological frameworks generally espouse. But in fact the real core of dispensationalism is just the idea that there are rigid, fundamental distinctions between how God deals with humans in different eras or "dispensations." So rather than the church being viewed as a progressive development of what began in the Old Testament with the nation of Israel, the "church age" is considered an entirely separate dispensation from this previous era. Thus, the Old Testament prophecies of a glorious future for Israel are not interpreted as being metaphorically fulfilled by the church, but rather as pertaining to a future millennial dispensation involving Israel again after the church has been raptured away. This allows dispensationalists to interpret these prophecies in a much more literal way than non-dispensationalists are typically able to do. It also provides a convenient explanation for how most of the Old Testament laws and practices can be viewed as no longer applicable today, which I suspect is probably why dispensationalism is now such a widely presumed system of theology even in the broader evangelical world outside of the Plymouth Brethren.

For Darby and the early Brethren, however, this new dispensational framework also had some distinctly more radical implications for how they viewed the church that would naturally come as a big surprise to most evangelicals today. They held that each age or dispensation was designed by God as a test to basically demonstrate the inevitable failure of human effort, even on the part of "saved" people. In their view, each dispensation was characterized by a glorious beginning, but the people of that dispensation then almost immediately largely failed to live up to its promise. Accordingly, they thought the church had long since become mostly unfaithful to the original pattern envisioned for it in the New Testament, in which it was supposed to be a single, unified testimony to the "one body" of Christ. Instead, that testimony was now fractured into various denominations and therefore "in ruins," as they sometimes put it. Their new movement was consequently characterized by a strong "back to the Bible" restorationist fervor. In their view, they weren't another denomination at all; they were the faithful remnant who were obediently turning away from the denominational mess that Christianity had sadly devolved into, along with its variety of unbiblical traditions, such as having a professional clergy. They were the ones who the Holy Spirit was finally bringing back—as far as possible in a dispensation that had already failed the test—to at least a scaled-back version of the original New Testament vision for the church. They were the ones who were "gathered" (one of their favorite words) in Jesus' name alone instead of in the name of some denomination or its founder. This is why they originally refused to take a denominational name, preferring instead, rather pompously in my opinion, to simply call themselves "the brethren" in whatever town or area was being referred to. For that matter, many of them still retain this preference to this day. But since one of their largest congregations was in Plymouth, England, it was the "Plymouth Brethren" designation that eventually stuck, at least in practice, though importantly for them, not in any formal or official capacity.

I have already alluded to the fact that the Brethren today have long since divided into various branches or sub-denominations, and it would be very unfair to lump them all together. Some of the branches, usually designated "closed" or "exclusive," have doubled down to varying degrees (in some cases extreme) on the more cult-like attitudes of the original movement. Not surprisingly, along with this they have also generally become very strict in their traditions, and

very isolated from all other denominations. On the other hand, the larger and usually much less fundamentalist open branch that I previously mentioned has significantly toned down or in some cases even completely rejected many of the original peculiarities of the movement, including the idea that the church is in ruins. Their congregations are much more independent from one another, and therefore also more diverse in their views, and many of them, at least, see themselves as pretty similar to and friendly with the majority of other evangelical churches. But even so, they still generally believe they have a qualitatively more biblical way of conducting their church services than anyone else.

The upside, perhaps, to all this somewhat self-aggrandizing background is that I really do think the Brethren way of doing things tends to instill more devotion to individual Bible study among the majority of their people than is the case for many other denominations. There is something of a “do-it-yourself” mentality built into the Brethren ethos. With no official pastor or leader to tell the flock what they are expected to believe, or to answer questions about why some doctrine or other is considered important, individuals understandably tend to feel a little more responsibility to learn these things for themselves. This is no doubt especially true for the men, since they are encouraged from a young age not only to regularly share relevant thoughts and scriptures in the worship services, but also even to develop their preaching ability if they show any potential for it at all. But I think it applies to some degree to the women as well. All are generally expected to be intimately familiar with the entire Bible, from the arcane Old Testament prophecies that many other Christians gloss over or never read, to the specific New Testament instructions to the church at Corinth that many other Christians dismiss as only intended for that particular culture.

The associated downside to this do-it-yourself mentality is that I also think there is a tendency among even many of the most influential Brethren to be not particularly well-versed in the principles of exegesis, which often results in rather dubious biblical interpretations and expositions. They may string together totally unrelated, out-of-context passages as proof-texts just because they share a word in common, for example, making them out to say things their authors clearly weren’t actually trying to communicate. The more traditional Brethren in particular also frequently follow in the steps of their earlier writers, who seemed to be inordinately fond of conjuring up fanciful claims of symbolism and typology in the Bible that usually aren’t at all convincing to anyone outside of their own heritage. But in any case they are totally committed to the core evangelical doctrine of absolute biblical inerrancy, which means if you can convince them the Bible says something other than what they’ve been taught, they will change their minds. (Although that’s usually very difficult to do, of course, given how deeply they’ve typically imbibed the interpretations that are generally considered orthodox or important in their assemblies, but I won’t go any further into that.)

2) “Gathering” Baggage

With this background in mind, it should come as no surprise that I absorbed not only an unquestioning belief in “the gospel” from a very young age, but also a sense that we inheritors of the Plymouth Brethren legacy were pretty special and didn’t have any reason to consult the opinions of scholars or commentators or preachers or anyone else to help us properly understand the Bible. It’s not that I thought the Brethren assemblies were perfect; far from it. In fact, my parents constantly talked about the many gravely serious flaws they perceived in the current

condition of the movement. They were both originally from one of the exclusive branches, but after much wrestling with these issues ended up switching to the more common open branch when I was about 8 or 9 years old. This remained a very traumatic move for them for many years, and I'm not sure they ever grew completely comfortable with some of the open assemblies' ways of doing things, which in their view very often seemed a little too compromised with the insufficiently spiritual practices and priorities of the broader evangelical world. But their constant and sincere concern with "Brethren principles," like what it meant to be "gathering in the Lord's name," all through my teen years and beyond seemed deeply spiritual to me, and I was convinced they were some of the godliest, most mature Christians in the world. Even when I was still young enough that my eyes would frequently glaze over on listening in to their discussions, I knew I wanted to eventually grow up to be as bold and caring and wise about these important biblical matters as they were.

Shortly after my parents' switch to the open Brethren, they felt that God was calling them to the mission field, something that was fairly common in that branch. Our family moved to Zambia when I was 11, and we lived on a remote mission station over three hours away from the nearest paved road. My dad was a doctor and spent most of his time treating the sick at the rudimentary hospital that the station was built around, but he also preached and taught, mostly via interpreter, whenever he could. My mom homeschooled us kids (there were six of us at the time, all boys), bucking the common practice of the other Brethren missionaries in the area who all sent their families to boarding school instead. She also taught Bible stories via her trusty flannelgraph board to the indigenous neighborhood kids, who were fascinated by us exotically wealthy foreigners and would congregate around our house almost every day. My siblings and I would play with these neighborhood kids to some extent, but the culture and language barriers kept us from really developing any close friendships with them. So mostly we just became very insular, meaning our lives revolved primarily around our own family and we really didn't have much serious contact with anyone else.

We only stayed on the mission field for four years, but for me, the culture shock of returning to public school in central Illinois as a 15-year-old was immense. I had known most of my classmates before, but they seemed totally different to me now that they were sophomores in high school compared to what they had been when I had last interacted with them in the 5th grade. The F-bombs and other crude language most of them freely engaged in, as well as their public displays of affection and general infatuation with all things sex (that most taboo of all subjects to even think about for me), just drove me even further inward in my attitude than even our isolated time in Africa had done. I couldn't imagine many of them being genuine Christians, or at least not very serious ones, despite the fact that the majority in this rural Midwestern town probably attended church and believed the basic tenets of Christianity to be true. But I was very awkward and introverted, and not one to risk being snickered at for trying to strike up a conversation about such things, so the end result was that I just didn't socialize much. I avoided practically all extracurricular activities at school, preferring instead to spend my spare time at home, honing my newly found programming skills on our family's fancy new IBM-compatible personal computer.

I certainly don't blame my parents entirely for my development of this extremely insular mindset that I now believe was rather unhealthy for me, but I think it's fair to say they implicitly encouraged it with their beliefs. We were supposed to be "in the world, not of it," after all, and

spending too much time socializing with the people of the world was viewed as a little dangerous, since it might lead to various temptations to be more like them. Our true friendships, if we had to go outside of the immediate family for them, were supposed to be with other believers, preferably others who appreciated the doctrines taught only in the Brethren assemblies. But our assembly at that time was just an extremely small house church without any kids my age, so there was very little opportunity for that. This sense of isolation was also furthered by the fact that my parents were still at this point very heavily under the influence of the traditions of the much more fundamentalist exclusive branch they had recently left, which meant they considered practically all forms of entertainment to be at least a little “worldly,” if not downright sinful. They didn’t even own a TV, for example, and they never listened to popular music of any kind, not even if it was considered Christian. Drinking and dancing were obviously heavily frowned upon, and they also never went to movie theaters or shows or art galleries or even bowling alleys or ballgames. (They later loosened up a little on some of these guidelines, much to the benefit of my younger siblings.)

Despite this emphasis on keeping oneself “unstained” from the world, there was one big advantage to my parents’ general suspicion of the larger Christian environment outside of the Brethren, and that was that they strongly believed in getting a good secular education rather than attending a Bible college or seminary, as long as it was in a relatively “safe” field not inherently opposed to biblical morals and principles. I was able to fulfill this goal without compromising too much with worldly influences by attending a university that was close enough to home that I could commute instead of having to live on campus. I was a good student and got my bachelor’s degree in just three years, having gotten a head start by taking some college courses during my senior year in high school. I finally moved out on my own at the age of 21 in order to pursue a master’s degree, and I subsequently took my first real job as an embedded systems software engineer in the Chicago area a year and a half later.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I found moving out on my own to be a significant step in my “spiritual development.” My life was still extremely insular and sheltered, but I was finally attending other Brethren assemblies besides the tiny one where my dad had done almost all of the teaching, and I suppose this essentially forced me to begin standing on my own feet rather than totally relying on the tutelage of my parents. Little things these new assemblies did differently from what I was used to probably wouldn’t have bothered most people, but to me they were a major impetus to finally begin seriously studying the “Brethren principles” my parents were so committed to. I started reading various books and pamphlets from Brethren publishing companies to understand their arguments and see how strong they were. More importantly, I began poring over the New Testament to figure out for myself what I ought to believe about these issues, and why. This imparted new purpose to my Bible reading, and before long it became less of a chore for me and more of a genuine interest, not only for this specific end but also to understand what it said about other topics as well. And since I barely had a social life of any kind, I had plenty of time to pursue this interest, especially after I finished school and got a regular job. The energy I had previously channeled into learning engineering could now be channeled into learning what I was totally convinced were far more important things. The adventure had begun.

3) The Vast, Eye-opening Sea

The first theological topic outside of “Brethren principles” that I chose to devote significant study to during these first few years on my own proved to be very significant in setting my future course. This was the issue of creationism. I hadn’t been as heavily indoctrinated into the literalist, young-earth creationist (YEC) interpretation as many evangelicals are, because my dad had grown up believing in the “gap theory,” which is the variation of the old-earth creationist (OEC) view that had been taught by the early Brethren writers. (This may seem surprising, but remember that these early Brethren pre-dated the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and its aftermath that more-or-less brought the YEC dogma into prominence.) Since his switch to the open Brethren, however, my dad had started leaning more toward the YEC view that was much more common in that branch, and that’s also the view I had largely assimilated and managed to keep unshaken in my mind despite the secular science classes I had taken in college. I knew I wasn’t really well-versed in the scientific “proofs” for a young earth that I was pretty sure existed, however, and I wanted to be more familiar with the biblical arguments for it as well. So I went to my local Christian bookstore and bought three or four of the most scholarly-looking books they had from the most prominent YEC organization at the time, as well as one book that was written from an OEC point of view, just to be thorough. I didn’t expect to agree with this last one, but I wanted to see its arguments anyway, even if I suspected it would only be to better understand how to refute them.

I earnestly searched the YEC books for the best scientific arguments they could make, but to my dismay I found they all left me looking for something a little more substantial and convincing. Meanwhile, the OEC book mostly just angered me. Its author, a physicist by the name of Hugh Ross, didn’t even believe the flood of Noah was a worldwide event! How dare he take the inspired “Word of God” so non-literally? I couldn’t refute his science, but I knew he just had to be wrong because of his loose interpretation of scripture. My struggle with this issue lasted a few years and involved not only reading many more books and articles on the subject, but also participating in some email forums and Usenet groups dedicated to the purpose. (This was in the 1990s, before more modern forms of social media became a thing.) But in the end I had to concede. Hugh Ross and the other OEC proponents were right: The geologic column had been laid down over vast eons of time, not in a single, recent global flood event. Not only did the YEC arguments simply not work, most of them were downright embarrassingly bad. I had no choice but to adjust my interpretation of the Bible to be a little less literalist, at least when it came to the opening chapters of Genesis. Perhaps even more importantly, I had to adopt the position that “natural revelation,” meaning reason and evidence, could at least be a legitimately useful tool for helping us know how to interpret “special revelation,” meaning the inspired text of the Bible.

This was a substantial shift in my thinking, to be sure, but it didn’t significantly shake my faith. In fact, I quickly became more excited by it than disturbed. Growing up I had basically assumed that theology was just a straightforward matter of reading the Bible and remembering what it said about any particular topic. It was therefore something we in the Plymouth Brethren already understood perfectly well and had no serious questions about, and that’s why our discussions tended instead to be more focused on “deeper” issues, like symbolism and typology and the specific ways God wanted us to worship him in church. I now recognized in a much more mind-grabbing way that this wasn’t true at all. Theology was in fact full of interesting questions that

were not always straightforwardly answered in the Bible. Rather, there was much room for serious debate on what the relevant passages actually meant, and there was a meaningful place for rational thought and argumentation in this debate. I realized I would have to study these issues much more systematically and critically if I wanted to truly understand them. I couldn't just continue reading the Bible with the naive assumption that the interpretations I had absorbed from the Brethren, whether in person or by reading their literature, were automatically correct.

Over the next decade or so, I began filling shelf after shelf with increasingly more scholarly commentaries and books on various theological issues, from Calvinism vs. Arminianism and the "Lordship salvation" debate, to cessationism vs. continuationism and what it meant to be "led by the Holy Spirit," to the various views on prophecy and eschatology, to the nature and meaning of the atonement, to Christology and the proper understanding of the Trinity, and on and on. I devoted most of my spare time to understanding the biblical arguments that educated evangelicals raised for and against almost any theological position you could think of. Systematic theology became my number one obsession. I wrote papers for my personal website on many of these topics, mostly just to better organize my own thinking on them. It's amazing how many inconsistencies, false dichotomies, equivocations, and other logical fallacies can go unnoticed in our beliefs until we try to write them out in orderly fashion, and I was determined to root such flaws out of my theology wherever I could. I wanted every aspect of my Christian faith to be both positively demonstrable from the Bible and also able to stand the test of rigorous thinking.

Meanwhile, I hadn't abandoned my interest in "Brethren principles" or my strongly conditioned belief in the Brethren ways of doing things, though I was gradually growing a little more flexible on the topic. One of the ways I started honing my views on these issues was to get involved in various online communities where other Brethren were discussing and debating them, just as I had also done for the creationism debate. Before long I started noticing the few participants in these forums who seemed to approach things from a more intellectual angle than I was used to. They were the ones who could weigh both the strengths and the weaknesses of different positions without feeling compelled to consider one morally superior to another. Their primary interest was in seeing how well a tentative biblical interpretation fit the overall point of what was actually being said in the passage, not in simply insisting that the interpretation was self-evident or that they had prayerfully perceived it to be what the Holy Spirit intended. They weren't impressed by interpretational gimmicks like the assumption that the connotation of some word in one passage could be discerned by seeing how the same word was used in another passage with a completely different context or even by a completely different author. In short, I was beginning to learn and appreciate the methods of sound exegesis, which naturally helped my burgeoning interest in theology to flourish.

By this time I had moved from Illinois to Colorado, where I got a new job and found a new church (still in the Brethren, of course, though somewhat less traditional than what I was used to). As it happened, this congregation soon started shrinking, slowly at first as some of the older members started retiring and moving away, then drastically as more and more people started leaving because they didn't like how small it was getting, until it eventually got down to under a dozen people. This meant I had to take on more and more responsibility as one of the few who were left. Although I never considered myself particularly gifted as a teacher or public communicator, I was eventually preaching at least once a month. Developing sermons was a

time-consuming process for me, but it was also an opportunity to put my theological studies to practical use, and I worked hard to fill these sermons with real content and not just fluff. The fact that I was a single guy in my 30s in a tiny congregation with nobody else who was either in my age group or had a lot in common with me (other than a similar Brethren heritage) sometimes gave me a sense of loneliness and being out of place, but these were good people, and I generally felt useful, appreciated, and genuinely loved. As a strong believer in the Calvinist idea of God having a sovereign plan for absolutely everything that happened, I not only trusted that he would fully take care of all my companionship needs in his own good time without me having to worry about them, I also reasoned that he must have me in this fairly unique situation for his own good purposes, and I really thought I could see those good purposes unfolding.

4) Dark Clouds All Around

Despite my conviction that God was bringing me down this path and growing my knowledge of him, however, the further I progressed in my biblical and theological studies, the more I began to experience disturbing doubts about Christianity. These doubts started soon after my switch from the literalist YEC interpretation of Genesis to the more science-friendly OEC view instead. Although by then I had little trouble reconciling the OEC view itself with my faith, it opened the door to a far more ominous possibility, namely that if scientists had such good arguments for the age of the earth, maybe their arguments for evolution would turn out to be valid as well. This would pose a serious problem for my conviction in biblical inerrancy, because it conflicted with the idea of Adam and Eve being the first parents of the human race. And the Bible didn't just presume this "first parents" dogma in the Genesis creation story, which could fairly easily be interpreted in a creative or poetic way (perhaps as something like a parable instead of a literal accounting of events, for example). It also presumed the idea in distinctly non-poetic contexts, like genealogies and even some theological arguments in the New Testament.

For many years I racked every corner of my brain for possible answers to this conundrum. At first I was skeptical that evolution was actually true despite the age of the earth, but even a fairly cursory investigation of the evidence soon changed my mind about that. I then reasoned that even if God had indeed used evolution to create most species, perhaps he had changed strategies and introduced a one-off special creation event into the mix only when it came to human beings. This idea was attractive in that it held up the special status of humanity assumed by Christian theology, but it, too, eventually fell by the wayside with further research. I then moved on to the more radical idea that even though Adam and Eve weren't the first biological humans, perhaps they were the first "spiritual" humans, maybe the first in whom God had implanted a nonphysical soul with a moral conscience. But this view was not only philosophically implausible, it also had some very disturbing theological implications that I really didn't see any good way around.

I knew all along that the far more obvious solution was that the Bible had simply gotten it wrong, of course, and even though I wasn't yet ready to accept this solution, the possibility of it weighed constantly and heavily on my mind. I soon began seeing many other apparent errors in the text, including historical implausibilities in the story of the exodus (especially with the huge numbers reportedly involved), minor but real discrepancies between Kings and Chronicles, arguably more important inconsistencies in the gospels' resurrection and ascension narratives, and so on. Evangelical scholars had written up many proposed solutions to these kinds of "difficulties," of

course, and I studied and accepted most of their explanations. But in some cases even they had to admit that the text of the Bible as we now have it really does contain errors. For these cases they insisted that the errors were not in the original manuscripts, which no longer exist, but had only been introduced by copyists somewhere along the way. I found myself not only having to resort to this highly speculative solution more and more often, but also having to postulate more and more extensive and evidently deliberate modifications by the copyists, which left me very uncomfortable, to say the least. Furthermore, I was also beginning to appreciate some of the critical arguments regarding the multiple layers of authorship that had apparently gone into the Pentateuch, as well as other books like Daniel and Isaiah. Yet the New Testament attributed these books to their traditional authors, so this was extremely difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of inerrancy.

Meanwhile, there were many other commonly-raised objections to Christianity that began seriously bothering me as well. Some of these were very practical. For example, how could we hold that prayer really worked if its effects didn't seem to be measurable in any statistically significant way? If the Bible was really the word of God that Christians were supposed to read and cherish and base all their beliefs on, why had it taken the early church so long to settle which books were canonical, and how could we know their eventual, unofficial resolution was correct? (After all, it looked suspiciously like some of the books they included, like Hebrews, probably weren't really written by the people who they thought they were, and even more disturbingly, others, like Jude, contained extremely dubious quotations from non-canonical Jewish writings as if they were authoritative, so how were we to make sense of that?)

The Old Testament was especially problematic, of course, not only because of authoritative or canon issues that didn't seem to concern the New Testament authors (even though they were internally debated by the Pharisees and Sadducees and other Jewish factions of the time), but also because it just seemed like such a strange and sometimes even horrific precursor to our real system of beliefs. Even if our dispensational framework allowed us to say that God related to humans very differently in the Israelite period, for example, how was that supposed to justify the genocidal slaughter of the Canaanites that he supposedly ordered in the time of Joshua? And what were we to make of circumcision and sacrifices and the priestly system and all those other bizarre and frankly barbaric-seeming rituals of the Mosaic Law? Even if some of these things supposedly beautifully symbolized "the person and work of Christ," as we Brethren were fond of saying, that only plausibly covered a small fraction of the details, and besides, was that really a good reason for God to saddle the Israelites with such an unbearable burden, as the New Testament would later call it? If God actually showed up and talked to Moses and the patriarchs like the Bible said he did, why hadn't he communicated useful and timeless truths to them instead of all this repulsive and unclear stuff that sounded so suspiciously like primitive, man-made religion?

For that matter, the New Testament had its share of things that sounded suspiciously similar to some of the more dubious elements of primitive religion, too. These included various claims of angelic visitation and demonic possession and hearing the voice of God in visions and dreams, as well as various weird practices like baptism and fasting and speaking in tongues. For some reason I wasn't as bothered by these things, but I still wondered why God would choose to ordain or include them in his plan for the course of the world and the one actually true religion. What was the point of all the strangeness in this properly religious life? Indeed, what was the point of this

earthly life at all, if our ultimate destiny was an entirely different eternal life in heaven? And even if there was some legitimate reason why this earthly life was necessary or beneficial to eternal happiness, what did that say about the huge number of people, especially before modern medicine, who never got to experience it because they died in infancy or the womb?

There were also much more severe objections to New Testament doctrine to contend with, unfortunately. Some of them struck right at the very core of traditional Christian orthodoxy, including questions like how it could possibly make sense for Jesus to be both God and man, and why God would need the blood-sacrifice of himself in this human form before he could forgive sin. And then there was the one I struggled with by far the most deeply of all: the problem of hell. I came to see this as the ultimate form of the more famous problem of evil, the question of how suffering and evil can exist in the creation of an all-loving but all-powerful God. To my mind, this question could be answered quite reasonably and consistently with the Bible if we could just postulate that God had a redemptive plan in which all the suffering and evil in this world were only playing a temporary role as instruments in his hand to bring about a better end, one in which these very instruments would be decisively overcome and relegated to the status of distant memories. But if hell was real, then this answer didn't work; suffering and evil would continue forever. Could it really be consistent with an all-loving God to create people who would end up being eternally tormented in hell? The very thought of it was shocking to the conscience. I never saw any sense in the trite answer many Christians gave to this problem, that hell was just the natural result of our own free-will choices, not God's. But as hard as I tried to come up with a more rational defense, I never found the tentative "God's ways are higher than ours" quasi-justifications I was forced to adopt instead to be very satisfying. In fact, I often felt positively sick to my stomach about them.

The more I wrestled with these problems for inerrancy and Christianity in general, however, the more determined I grew to face up to them squarely and honestly and not just push them under the rug as most other Bible-believing Christians seemed to do. I didn't take my experiences of doubt and struggle as something to run the other direction from, as if they were attempts by Satan to destroy my faith. Rather, I took them in my essentially Calvinist way as part of the journey God wisely had me on in order to grow my faith and make it stronger. I even thought I could see how this was happening, to some extent. I was learning, I believed, that having a strong faith didn't mean having 100% certainty that Christianity was true, or never having questions and doubts about it. It meant having the courage to trust God anyway, in spite of the very real questions and doubts. Besides, wasn't it these very real questions and doubts, along with the struggles they provoked, that were serving as the primary fuel for my burning obsession to find answers that were both biblical and could stand up to careful scrutiny? Surely this was a good thing. And even if it turned out, in the worst possible case, that my beliefs would have to undergo radical changes to address these problems, perhaps even changes that others would consider heretical or incompatible with Christianity, that would only mean I was getting closer to the truth. After all, my trust was not ultimately in the Bible or in a set of religious doctrines that other people considered fundamental; it was in God himself, in his righteousness and love and faithfulness. And this would still be the case even if those religious doctrines turned out to be false, so what was there to worry about in honestly considering that possibility?

5) Changing Course

Rather than fearing or avoiding the difficulties that were causing my doubts and struggles, therefore, I really tried to see them as welcome challenges to help me clarify not only what I believed, but also why I believed it. In this way, my obsession with theology gradually became paired with an even greater obsession for apologetics, specifically the attempt to provide a reasonable defense of the Christian faith even in the face of such objections. To me this meant developing the most critically honest evaluation of the arguments both for and against Christianity that I possibly could. I didn't want to be the kind of apologist who just memorized an imposing-looking list of canned "proofs" for a presupposed conclusion and insisted that these totally settled the issue. I wanted to be the kind who could openly and sincerely admit that the evidence for Christian belief wasn't conclusive enough to remove all doubt. But I still needed to be able to show, especially to myself, that Christianity was at least more likely true than false under a sincerely unbiased analysis, in order to vindicate my understanding of faith as the courage to believe where the evidence was pointing in spite of the uncertainty it left. And to conduct such an honest, unbiased analysis, I needed to be free to follow the evidence wherever it led, no matter what—even if it could theoretically lead to my rejection of Christianity altogether, though I felt confident it wouldn't.

My commitment to this apologetic purpose was soon consuming huge amounts of my time and energy. Luckily, this wasn't a problem, because the remarkable success of the high-tech company I had been working for, combined with my frugal lack of family and social life, meant that I had saved up enough to be able to quit my regular job at the age of 38 in order to devote my full attention to the pursuit. I started my new life as a free man by signing up for some philosophy courses, which I chose to take from a local Baptist-affiliated seminary instead of a secular university because I figured they would spend more time focusing on the particular aspects of the field that had potential applications to the atheism vs. theism debate. These were my top priority as well, though in retrospect I think I learned a lot more from the other areas of philosophy that the classes fortunately also covered. My ultimate goal was not only to learn more about the philosophical arguments that were relevant for apologetics, but also to put this learning to good use by writing a different kind of apologetics book than any I had encountered so far, all of which had left me with at least a vague sense of dissatisfaction. The impression I got from most of these books was not only that their authors were greatly overstating their case, but also that the arguments they presented weren't even what was really convincing them to remain Christian anyway. To my mind, this suggested that they were catering mostly to other believers just looking for easy, intellectual-sounding validation that they were right rather than to natural skeptics and critical thinkers, such as I fancied myself, who sincerely wanted to follow the evidence wherever it led and were therefore really trying to assess the strength of the authors' deepest reasons for belief. I thought perhaps my very real struggles with Christianity were therefore equipping me to be able to pen a much-needed, more open and honest and rational defense of Christianity that wouldn't have these defects.

I started work on this ambitious project immediately upon quitting my job, though I never finished it. One of the first conclusions I reached in the process was that the evidence against biblical inerrancy was simply too strong to deny. I had been studying and struggling with this core tenet of evangelical theology for about a decade, which I suppose just goes to show how

deeply I had been indoctrinated into it, given how few arguments for it there were that weren't obviously circular. Finally breaking free of this dogma therefore came as a huge relief in many ways, especially since I no longer had to wrestle with many of the issues that had previously caused me so much consternation. I could now just freely admit that Adam and Eve weren't really our first parents, for example; the biblical authors just naively assumed they were. I could hold that God hadn't really instructed Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a test of his faith, or Joshua to slaughter the Canaanites, or maybe even Moses to decree all those strange details of the Old Testament law; these things had just come to be mistakenly attributed to him in the oral traditions that eventually made their way into the text. So my belief in Christianity continued to hold. As in the previous steps I had taken, I felt this had to be a move forward for my faith rather than backward.

My beliefs didn't really even change all that much in the immediate aftermath of this move, other than in those particularly problematic areas where the Bible seemed factually untenable. I didn't at first think the presence of such errors meant the Bible was generally untrustworthy, for example, especially in the most theologically important parts like the New Testament epistles. I presumed the biblical authors for the most part had still received genuine revelations from God that they were in turn communicating to their readers, and that the theological positions they took were therefore on mostly solid ground, even if their writing wasn't technically "inspired" in a way that would make it totally free from false assumptions or assertions. After all, how else could we explain the messianic prophecies that Jesus had fulfilled? Surely these showed at least a strong likelihood that God had revealed naturally indiscernible truths to the authors of the Old Testament. And if so, surely that was good reason to trust that he had also revealed naturally indiscernible truths to the New Testament apostles, thereby vouchsafing the integrity of the fundamental Christian message. This was going to be an important argument in my apologetics book, to get from the merely abstract intermediate conclusion of philosophical theism to the more important concrete truth of Christianity itself.

The problem with the argument, however, was that by now I was well aware that not all the claims of fulfilled messianic prophecy really stood up to critical examination. This meant I'd have to carefully search the Bible and find the ones that did in fact pass careful muster and could therefore serve as evidence for supernatural revelation. But when I did that, to my surprise and consternation, I found absolutely none. The impossibility of knowing whether the claimed fulfillments of most of these "prophecies" actually happened was bad enough, but what was even more disturbing was the realization that almost all of them were in fact severely misinterpreted by the New Testament authors who cited them. The famous passage in Micah 5 supposedly prophesying that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem, for example, actually said nothing at all about a place of birth. It was just a prediction that a future king would arise from the original clans of Bethlehem, meaning the family of David, restoring that line to the prominence it had previously enjoyed in the glory days of Israel's past. (And the gospels' inconsistent genealogies for Jesus made it somewhat dubious whether he actually came from that Davidic lineage anyway, even ignoring the misinterpretation that it was a prophecy of where he would be born.) The even more famous passage in Isaiah 7 supposedly prophesying Jesus' virgin birth was even worse. It had nothing to do with a future messiah or savior figure at all, but was rather a message specifically for King Ahaz in Isaiah's own time. And the "liberal scholars" who had produced the RSV translation were right that the word in the original Hebrew, before it got translated into the

Greek version quoted by the New Testament, simply meant young woman, not virgin. The “sign” to show that God was “with us” (meaning on the side of the kingdom of Judah) wasn’t that there would be a miraculous virgin birth hundreds of years later; it was that the threat from the two imposing armies allied against Ahaz would soon be nullified by a devastating Assyrian campaign against those armies, and that this would happen by the time a child would be conceived and born and weaned in the ordinary manner. Furthermore, the conception and birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz (meaning “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil”) was narrated immediately after this passage, strongly suggesting that he was in fact viewed as the “Immanuel” child who presaged this promised, “quick to the plunder” Assyrian campaign.

Instead of being a convincing argument for the truth of Christianity that I could use in my apologetic work, the messianic prophecies claimed in the New Testament soon became a source of embarrassment for me. I had to argue, rather dubiously, that Matthew and the other supposed authors making these “fulfillment” claims didn’t really mean that the “prophecies” they cited had literally predicted the events of Jesus’ day; they just meant that these passages and the earlier events they described could be seen as significantly foreshadowing the somewhat similar later events. “Rachel weeping for her children” was clearly just a reference to the Babylonian exile, for example, not a prediction of Herod’s brutal slaughter of Jewish infants, but the horror of the exile foreshadowed the similar horror of that later event. In this way, the later event could be said to have “fulfilled” what was actually written of the earlier one. Similarly, “Out of Egypt have I called my son” was clearly just a reference to the exodus, but it foreshadowed the later event of Jesus returning with his parents from their flight to Egypt.

Despite this setback, I still thought at first that even though these kinds of foreshadowing events and their descriptions in the Old Testament weren’t literally fulfilled prophecies, they could still be taken as a suggestive kind of evidence that God had supernaturally orchestrated the course of history and the writing of the Bible to include them. But to argue for that, I needed to find examples that were on more solid historical ground than Herod’s supposed slaughter of infants or Jesus’ supposed flight into Egypt, since those details were only mentioned in Matthew and so could very well have been invented by the author of that gospel just for the purpose. The famous “suffering servant” passage in Isaiah 53, which we Brethren especially loved to read in our worship services as a prophetic preview of Jesus’ crucifixion, was the most obvious candidate. But the more I considered it, the more I realized the “foreshadowing” similarities actually had a pretty ordinary explanation. The whole section starting from chapter 40 had clearly been written at the end of the Babylonian exile (and therefore by someone other than Isaiah) in celebration of Cyrus’ decision to let the Judean captives return to Jerusalem, and it’s easy enough to see why its author would take this as a sign that Israel’s sins had now been forgiven. In other words, like a sacrificial lamb, God’s servant, Israel (referred to in the personal singular but probably best thought of as the “righteous remnant” of that generation), had humbly and submissively endured the captivity and thereby borne the full extent of God’s wrath against his people, thus securing his blessing and encouragement to make a new beginning. So if Christians later saw this as a reference to Jesus, that wasn’t really indicative of prophetic revelation or even of divinely orchestrated foreshadowing in the original passage; it was more likely only because they had developed a similar sacrificial theology about what Jesus’ death had accomplished.

Perhaps the last claim of fulfilled prophecy to fall for me was the one about the “70 weeks” in Daniel 9. This passage had been drilled into my head since adolescence, as it was practically the cornerstone for the dispensational view of end times, and dispensationalists also regarded it as the premier example of a precisely fulfilled prediction. They said it had prophesied the exact date of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, down to the very day. But the more I studied it, the more dubious this began to sound. Not only did some dispensationalists have different versions than others of the exact starting and ending dates, none of which were convincing to non-dispensationalists, but also it sounded suspiciously like these dates, or rather the occasions that supposedly determined them, had been cherry-picked from among multiple equally-plausible alternatives just in order to make the chronology fit. Its reliance on a 360-day calendar was also highly suspect, given that the Jewish calendar was actually based on lunar months with an extra leap-month thrown in as needed to keep the seasons in sync. Still, I had to admit it seemed like a fairly amazing coincidence that they had been able to find a way to make the chronology work out so closely to the time of Jesus with these assumptions. But the arguments for Daniel being written in the time of the Maccabees were ultimately more persuasive, and that ruled it out from being a genuine prophecy, despite the coincidence. (I eventually stopped being so impressed by the coincidence anyway, when I later realized that an equally impressive possible chronology could be worked out under the more historically plausible assumption that the passage was written in the Maccabean period. Rather than involving 69 “weeks” of 360-day “years” between the decree of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah and the triumphal entry of Jesus before his crucifixion, this chronology involves 62 weeks of ordinary years between the start of the captivity, when Jeremiah’s prophetic word supposedly went out that it would last for 70 years, and the murder of the anointed priest Onias about three and a half years before the “abomination of desolation,” when Antiochus desecrated the Jewish temple.)

The upshot of all this is that although I still believed the authors of the Bible had in many cases been gifted with valuable theological insight from God, I soon began doubting that this gift had ever been in the form of specific prophetic content, or “special revelation.” I was now reading the Bible in an entirely different way from how I used to. I was no longer trying to discern what God was intending to say, albeit through human authors. I was now focused entirely on what the human authors were intending to say, and why they were intending to say it, and what I might be able to learn from their thought processes even if I didn’t always agree with them.

This meant, among other things, that I would have to rethink almost my entire theology. The dispensational framework that we Brethren so dearly cherished clearly had to go, for example. This framework had never actually been taught or presented by any of the biblical authors, much less consistently argued for. It had always relied instead on the assumption that God had given various individual authors different little pieces of a grand puzzle that not even they knew how to fit together, because it wouldn’t be until all the pieces were revealed that God’s people would finally be able to figure that out. So with my new view of the Bible as the thoughts of theologically gifted men instead of as an enigmatic assortment of puzzle-piece assertions by God, the whole dispensational framework simply didn’t make sense anymore. I had a lot of work ahead of me to figure out what parts of my former belief system, or even of Christianity at all, would survive my new way of thinking.

6) Picking Up Speed

In spite of how overwhelming this task of rethinking almost all my beliefs seemed at times, my new approach to the Bible was an exciting development for me, and once again I took it as a mark of spiritual growth. For the first time in my life, I felt like I finally had a fully consistent hermeneutic, or way of approaching biblical interpretation. I had grown up thinking of the Bible as direct revelation from God, and despite my maturing commitment to sound exegesis, that still meant almost any workable interpretation of the text was a live possibility. (As long as it didn't contradict the clear teaching of some other passage, of course, which admittedly forced me into some pretty strained interpretations when I still believed in inerrancy.) This was because God could choose to throw any idea he wanted into the text at any time; there was no rational accounting for where he might decide to embed the puzzle pieces without the authors even realizing it. But now that I thought of the Bible as just the words of ordinary men instead, it was far more obvious why context and getting into the minds of the authors were what really mattered.

The way to understand and assess something that was written by another person (let's assume a man in this example, perhaps one writing thousands of years ago) naturally starts with trying to put yourself in that other person's shoes. You have to ask yourself what he was trying to accomplish with his writing, and why, and how. If he was narrating events or telling a story, for example, was it something he had heard through the grapevine and perhaps wanted to put a new spin on, or was it his own personal experience? If he was exhorting his readers to action, did they simply need to be motivated, or to be taught something new in order to grasp the significance of the exhortation? If he was trying to teach them something new, was it something uncontroversial and therefore only new to them in the sense that they hadn't yet been educated on it, or was it something debatable that they'd have to be convinced of in order to dispel any inclination to disagreement or doubt? If he was attempting to convince them of something, did he have access to some new or private information on the subject that they would quite reasonably need to know in order to change their minds, or was he just arguing for his opinion on the basis of premises they already accepted? Whatever the situation, you have to think about what his background beliefs and goals must have been that would explain why he chose to write the particular way he did, rather than the way you might have expected if you were assuming a different set of background beliefs and goals. These are very basic interpretational tools that just make intuitive sense, but ones that I couldn't really fully employ when I thought of the Bible's ultimate author as God instead of men.

With these interpretational methods now finally at the fore of my thinking, however, the Bible started coming alive to me in a whole new way. I wasn't just woodenly focusing on the text as if it were a set of axioms to reason from; I was really seeing, often for the first time, the situations the authors were in as they were writing it. The point, I now believed, wasn't to just take in and automatically agree with whatever they said, it was to actively interact with their thought processes and their reactions to those situations, to think about why they said what they did and whether their conclusions were appropriate. This, I reasoned, was essentially how God must have intended for us to actively "do" theology all along. The Bible, in this view, was a helpful aid for theological inquiry, not the essential basis for that endeavor. After all, the early Christians obviously hadn't needed the text of the New Testament in order to understand God, since they

lived in the days before that text had even been assembled and disseminated. And the fact that the Bible's authors often made mistakes or unwarranted theological assumptions didn't mean their writing wasn't helpful, because what better way was there to grow in our understanding of God than to wrestle with the flaws in their thinking and try to improve on it? So why did we ever presume it had to be full of supernatural revelations in order to be useful for its purpose?

Reassuringly, this "thinking along with the authors" approach seemed to support some traditional Christian doctrines pretty well. For example, Paul's major contention that the Gentile believers had an equal place in the church along with the Jewish ones seemed quite well-supported by his common-sense argument that God wasn't only the God of the Jews, but of the Gentiles as well. His claim that when Jesus had appeared to him, he had appointed him as an apostle to the Gentiles was also a solid argument, assuming he wasn't just straight-out lying about that. So what if some of his further attempts to bolster his position, such as his hopelessly muddled argument that the promise to Abraham and his descendants had actually been to his singular "seed," were on shaky ground? The overall conclusion still stood. Similarly, Paul's basic doctrine of the resurrection and second coming could pretty sensibly be established without appeal to special revelation, at least if we still held Jesus to possess divine knowledge on the subject. After all, Paul said he had believed this "by the word of the Lord," which might very well be a reference to Jesus' specific teaching on the subject, and this teaching had in fact been similarly summarized by the gospel writers in their versions of the Olivet discourse.

The more I read the Bible with this goal of understanding its authors' motivation and reasoning in mind, however, the more I realized how few of these reassuring examples there actually were. The mostly narrative, historical parts showed very little evidence of being written by people with first-hand knowledge of the events. The gospels in particular seemed to have been compiled and adapted from secondary sources and layers of tradition instead, despite their mention of eyewitnesses in a few cases. And in the more doctrinal parts, like the epistles, the authors usually didn't even bother making arguments or explaining their reasoning at all; they just casually asserted their dogmatic declarations as if they were obvious. They only very rarely mentioned the teaching of Jesus, for example, or even any kind of vision or revelation they might have experienced, which you'd think they'd appeal to if these were how they had learned the particular points they were trying to make. Sometimes they would argue from the text of the Old Testament, but the passages they quoted were frequently rather dubious, and usually taken very much out of context, as already noted. And as for the Old Testament itself, its authors would sometimes claim that "the word of the Lord" had come to them, but they generally didn't explain what they meant by that, like whether this "word" had involved an audible voice or an angelic visitation or what. So what reason did their readers have to be confident that it was actually a true revelation and not just an ordinary dream or intuition falsely presumed to be a message from God? In the end, I found very little in the way of specific Christian doctrines that were actually argued for in a convincing or even plausible manner. So I began to doubt more and more of these specific doctrines, along with more and more of what the Bible actually said. In a word (specifically one that had previously held nothing but negative connotations for me), my theology was becoming increasingly liberal.

By this time I had finally said goodbye to the little Brethren church I had grown so closely connected with since coming to Colorado. This was a difficult but long overdue move for me, and

getting it over with came as a big relief, since it meant I would no longer feel internally pressured to resist for their sake the trajectory that my beliefs were undeniably on. I could now allow myself to openly question whether homosexuality was actually a sin, for example, since Paul's argument about it being "unnatural" didn't really make much sense. Even more radically, I soon began to doubt the existence of Satan and his supposed demonic forces, since the stories of these beings in the Bible (mostly the gospels, which I now took to be fairly thoroughly infiltrated with rumor and legend) were so inconsistent and bizarre. Why would demons beg to be allowed to possess a herd of pigs in order to avoid being sent to hell, for example, only to immediately kill the pigs, which presumably meant they wouldn't be able to possess them anymore? And how exactly were ordinary people in the gospels supposedly able to distinguish between demonic possession and mere epileptic fits or other kinds of illnesses anyway? The references in the epistles to the "enemy" and his deceptions weren't much better. Surely it made more sense to just take these to heart as if they were warnings about various natural temptations instead of accepting their authors' primitive presumption that there was an actual being named Satan behind such things.

My task of rethinking my theology thus proceeded apace, eventually reaching all the way to the historically "heretical" point where I was no longer convinced of the doctrine of the Trinity and the idea that Jesus was actually God, since none of the very few Bible passages that unambiguously asserted his deity gave any solid reason for their claim. Perhaps he was instead just the man God had specially chosen as an instrument to finally reveal his existence and love to the world in a more tangible way. Even as a mere man, wouldn't Jesus' miraculous resurrection be a fitting way for God to publicly validate that his core message was correct? And even if the gospel writers hadn't given us a very accurate record of his teaching, presumably they had captured enough of its flavor for us to sensibly discern that the important themes were loving one another and trusting God as our heavenly father, in order to exemplify what his universal kingdom was all about. To believe this wasn't to reject the fundamental truth of Christianity, it was to affirm it, while also stripping it of all the mythological and religious baggage that had so quickly and inevitably accumulated around its important message. Surely this was finally the true essence of Christianity that could stand up to the reasonable scrutiny that had so devastatingly exposed the utter irrationality of evangelicalism. Or at least I certainly hoped it could, but at the same time I knew I hadn't quite yet gotten to the bottom of my quest.

7) Abandoning Ship

I sometimes marvel at how I managed to keep believing in Christianity in at least some form through so many years of doubts and struggles and gradually but radically evolving beliefs. What was it that had me so convinced there must be something at the bottom that was true, and that I would therefore eventually find a way to believe it that was fully consistent with the natural revelation of evidence and reason? I honestly wasn't sure at the time. I realized fairly early on that if I hadn't been indoctrinated into it from a young age, I probably never would have converted. The arguments for it just weren't that strong. I could easily see how Christianity seemed positively crazy when considered from the outside, especially in its more fundamentalist forms that I had originally held. But even after I had allowed myself to slice practically all the way through that Gordian knot of tangled implausibilities, I still hadn't really discovered any

genuinely convincing evidence for even the thoroughly stripped-down version of Christian belief that was left.

When considered from the inside, however, Christianity just felt to me like it had to be true. There were memorable times when, after I had absolutely racked my brain for hours wrestling with some of its problems, I found that even though I hadn't come up with satisfactory answers to them, some thought or passage from the Bible would seem to jump out at me and touch me in a powerful way. I would find myself totally ready to temporarily resign from the struggle and simply "be still and know" that God was real, for example. The wave of peace that would often come over me in those times, in contrast to the turmoil I had worn myself out over just before, was almost palpable. I didn't take this feeling as the natural response of an exhausted brain at the end of its rope when it finally allows itself to just accept what it has been conditioned to believe without trying to resolve the cognitive dissonance. I took it as coming directly from the Holy Spirit: Almighty God comforting his poor, beloved child, letting me know once again that he was bigger than all my doubts and struggles. The intensity of the feeling usually only lasted a few minutes, and I always knew the battle would probably resume the next morning, but that was OK; God was giving me just the strength I needed to carry on one more day in the struggle, and I felt sincerely loved and humbled and thankful for it.

In retrospect, this reliance on personal feeling and wishful thinking was especially ironic for me, not only because it conflicted with my conscious commitment to follow the evidence wherever it led, but also because it was precisely what left me unsatisfied with other apologists. I wanted them to be honest, to tell me their actual reason for believing in Christianity instead of pretending their weak-tea arguments were what was convincing them it had to be true. But I hadn't faced up to my actual reason for being convinced it had to be true in spite of my doubts and struggles either.

At any rate, as I finally began to recognize that it was mostly only feelings that were keeping my belief intact, their power over my thinking began to wane. I realized that these feelings did not count as good evidence. By this time the only supernatural claim that my understanding of Christianity still took as foundational and solid ground for belief was the resurrection of Jesus, so everything now hinged on that. If there truly was good reason to believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead, then Christianity still meant something; God had validated its message. If not, then Christianity was just another man-made religion: an impressive piece of work, perhaps, and certainly full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing. I turned my attention more squarely than I ever had before to the arguments apologists cited for this singular, most essential claim of Christianity. I read the lengthiest and most scholarly defenses of the resurrection I could find, but the bottom line is I just didn't find their arguments convincing. The assumption that Jesus had miraculously appeared to various people in physical, bodily form simply wasn't very successful at explaining why the New Testament authors wrote about these appearances in the particular ways they did instead of in the ways I would have expected them to if that were actually the case. But when I considered instead the possibility that what the earliest Christians considered resurrection "appearances" had actually just been naturally explainable dreams or visions or powerful feelings, although they had later been greatly embellished in the retelling, the difficulties in trying to make consistent sense of their reasons for writing the way they did cleared up significantly. It began to look increasingly likely that this was the true explanation for the

origin of Christianity. (My previous paper entitled “Why I Rejected the Christian Faith” goes into much more detail on this.)

Having finally reached the conclusion that the supposed bodily resurrection of Jesus very likely hadn't actually happened, I abandoned the ship of religion and stopped considering myself a Christian. I still retained at least a tentative belief in God for perhaps another year or two, but to my mind, at least, it was no longer the God of Christianity or any other religious system that I believed in. It was more like the God of Thomas Paine and the Enlightenment deists, a God who not only didn't raise Jesus from the dead (at least not in our physical time and space, or in any special way that made him any different from anyone else), but who also didn't even reveal himself at all except in the way of natural revelation, or rational thought. But despite “his” enigmatic hiddenness (using the masculine pronoun here only because of convention), I still reasoned that he must have had a purpose for deciding to create the universe, and it made sense to think this purpose probably included the evolution of human beings, so I retained hope, at least, that he loved us and had a perfect afterlife in store for us, regardless of what religion we might or might not belong to, or even what we might or might not believe about his existence.

Without the threat of eternal consequences to bias my thinking on this subject, however, I soon found this tentative belief in God growing more and more agnostic, and eventually disappearing altogether. I wasn't convinced by the traditional “first cause” style of argument for God from the apparent contingency of the universe, because that didn't explain why this particular version of God, the one who chose to create this particular universe, should exist instead of a different version who would have chosen to create a different universe. This in turn meant that the God the argument was positing was not a necessary being after all, but a contingent one, one whose existence would therefore call for an external explanation just as much as the argument insisted the universe's did.

I initially considered the argument from morality to be a little more persuasive, because the idea of objective morality just seemed intuitively right to me, and I thought that was best explained by the existence of a personal, even if only deistic, God. But I had no actual evidence that morality was objective, except in the sense that it is apparently an objectively true fact that humans evolved in such a way that they almost universally value the kinds of things morality seems to be based on, such as personal autonomy and happiness. The posited existence of something more than this, something called “objective morality,” wouldn't really serve as a more ultimate explanation for why we evolved these values, nor would it settle any debates about how to apply them, so what reason was there to think it was true?

The last argument for the existence of God that I had left was the mystery of consciousness, specifically the way we seem to experience “qualia” like colors and pain even though we can't even conceptualize any way to describe them except in purely self-referential terms. (Think of the classic question of whether your experience of red could actually be like my experience of blue, for example.) If the task of characterizing these experiences in an objective way was truly impossible, it meant they could never even in principle be programmed into an artificial intelligence, no matter how advanced, at least not knowingly or intentionally. This in turn seemed to me to point to there being something genuinely nonphysical in our essence, which I thought would best be explained by a nonphysical God. But an actual discrete “soul” (or whatever else we might call this nonphysical component) was extremely difficult to reconcile with the gradual

evolutionary process that I fully believed in by now, and besides, despite reading extensively on the subject of philosophy of mind, I could find no good answers as to how such a nonphysical component would solve or even lessen the mystery anyway. Meanwhile, the argument from evil and the question of why God would create such an imperfect, pain-filled world, even if he also had a perfect one later in store for us, remained as strong as ever, and I gradually began regarding these as more convincing reasons to actively disbelieve in a personal God than the argument from consciousness was to believe in one. And so my epic journey finally came to an end, leaving me with almost the exact opposite worldview from the one I had originally hoped to defend: I was an atheist.

8) Floating Free

In calling myself an atheist, what I specifically mean is that I think the likelihood of there being a personal God is very low. I admit I don't know why the universe exists, and I don't dispute the idea that there might well be some nonphysical, and therefore arguably "supernatural," ultimate cause behind it all. But whatever this mysterious ultimate cause might be, if indeed there even needs to be one, I see no reason to think of it as a personal being rather than just a cosmic principle of some kind—perhaps a Platonic form-like reality to the most fundamental laws of physics, for example. So I see no sense in calling it "God." I realize there are some theologians on the liberal edges of Christianity who hold that God isn't "a being" anyway, but rather something like "being itself" (whatever that might mean), and so would perhaps say my openness to such a nonphysical ultimate cause still counts as belief in God, or at least agnosticism on the subject. But that way of thinking seems like an abuse of the English language to me. To my mind, the atheist label is an accurate fit for who I have finally become.

To any traditional Christian who might be reading my story, I expect this conclusion will seem like the tragic outcome of a defective faith gone totally off the rails, perhaps because it was never relational or repentant enough to be real in the first place, or perhaps because it was tempted down an ever more slippery slope by intellectual pride or some other sin. I get it; the old me would have thought the same thing. And even now, I often feel a tinge of tragedy about the atheist conclusion myself, because I still genuinely think it would be a nice thing if there was a God who had a good purpose for everything that happened, and who had an eternity of perfect bliss in store for us after our earthly life comes to an end. I don't understand why some people (including even some Christians) are actually repulsed by this idea, in at least one or the other of its parts. I find it very attractive, in the sense that if it were up to me, I'd choose for it to be true. But liking an idea and wishing it to be true do not count as valid reasons for actually believing it to be true, at least not to my way of thinking, and in this case I simply don't see any such reasons.

In the main, however, I do not regard my story as a tragic one. This is because there are just too many ways in which my life is noticeably better now that I'm an atheist than it ever was as a Christian. Yes, the transition was difficult and painful, and I especially hate how deeply it must have wounded my parents, who never could bring themselves to even ask me how it happened. But what it led to was a whole new kind of serenity and contentment on the other side. I still ponder the same great mysteries of philosophy that I considered so significant before, like why the universe exists and what it means to be conscious, and I don't have solid answers to them, but I am no longer constantly troubled by the struggle to resolve apparent contradictions and other

implausibilities in my worldview. Furthermore, I find I am now able to enjoy the simple pleasures of life more genuinely, since I am no longer always trying to place them in the context of what God is teaching me or wanting me to do. I have time to explore new topics and interests and hobbies that I previously subordinated to my constant quest to grow closer to God in my thoughts and beliefs and affections. The sense of freedom to make whatever I want of my own life is amazing.

I acknowledge that this freedom includes many very real opportunities to make a miserable mess of things, and that for this reason it might not sound so wonderful to everybody. I can even see how the structures and moral certainties of an artificial religious system not based on evidence or rational truth might nevertheless still serve as a practical aid to some people, to help them avoid at least some of these potential pitfalls. But I suspect they do more harm than good for most. In any case, I find it much more fulfilling to fully embrace the inherent freedom of this life with eyes wide open, to thoughtfully decide for myself how I choose to live it, guided by my own best attempts at moral and practical reasoning where applicable, without feeling the need to internally judge others for making radically different choices from mine, as long as they're not hurting anyone in the process. I think the discovery and living out of this freedom is what the existential philosophers had in mind with the word "authenticity." In the language I'm more used to, however, I would say it's like being a whole new "born again" person.

My only real regret is that the journey to get here took me so long, and that even now, almost 10 years after my deconversion, I still have so much baggage left over from devoting over half of my expected lifespan to such a powerful delusion. I'm not angry over this, but I do sometimes think about how differently things could have gone if I had deconverted in my teens or early 20s instead of my early 40s, for example. I almost certainly would have had a more "normal" life, presumably with healthier social connections and perhaps a family of my own. Who knows how many memorable and stimulating pursuits I would have delved into instead of spending so much time studying the Bible and theology and apologetics? But dwelling on regret is clearly no way to live. Now that I no longer think there is a God who has a sovereign plan for each of our lives, I don't believe any path is ever the absolute ideal anymore. I see pros and cons to almost every course of life, and almost every decision we might make along the way. My own course resulted in my missing out on a lot of things other people get to enjoy, but I also get to enjoy a lot of things other people miss out on. That's no tragedy, as I see it from my atheist perspective; it's just life. And I admit it's a long way from perfect, but it's still a pretty fantastic adventure. So to anyone who has made it to the end of my story, I wish you a hearty "Bon voyage!" whether or not your odyssey is similar to mine.