



"The Problem with Christianity..."

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"Where is the peace and joy, where is the demolition of my wrong desires, where is the increase of wealth and security, where is the fulfilled promises of Christianity?"

I must admit that this has been a too often heard question not easily answered. Talking with my colleague, Stuart McAllister, he told me this is probably the most common question he hears today across Europe. Disillusionment is a growing theme in our churches. In fact, disillusionment has led many to leave the church. It was G.K. Chesterton who said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."⁽¹⁾ However, many come to Christianity, thinking they have found the ideal treasures that it offers, and have walked away.

May I suggest that the question is improperly phrased. This isn't so much a problem with Christianity, but often a problem of a misconception

of what Christ promises. This often comes at the fault of the listener. But often, too, the messenger is not guiltless.

Michael Shermer is an example of one who has tasted and walked away. He is publisher of Skeptic Magazine and was recently seen on the PBS special "The Question of God." The day after the broadcast, he participated in an online discussion where he was asked of his "faith background." He answered, "I became an evangelical born-again Christian in 1971 and became an agnostic in 1977. I attended Pepperdine University to major in theology, but switched to psychology and there discovered science. By the time I graduated from a graduate program in experimental psychology I had abandoned religion."⁽²⁾

Personally, I believe Dr. Shermer has a misunderstanding of the philosophy of science which skews his view. But regardless of his view, Dr. Shermer still came to Christianity and found it undesirable after a short six years.

Why is this the case? I do not know Dr. Shermer's personal life, but I have heard testimonies of many who have taken a similar pathway. It is usually

marked with pain that may wear many faces: pain suffered by personal tragedy, felt through the death of a loved one, experienced through the abuses of others, or held in the angst of unanswered intellectual questions. Whatever faces pain may wear, the justification for leaving Christ's pathway is taken.

As believers, we want to be sure that we have the message of Christ clearly understood. He was no alien to pain, nor did he promise that his followers would be free from it. He knew that freedom was found in him—and him alone—but only after one follows him shouldering a cross. He knew that moral character was available to all, but only applied to those who allow the heart to be probed by the Holy Spirit. He knew that suffering was inevitable, but that those who possess his life will live beyond the grave—and will be given strength and grace in this life to overcome.

I can imagine Paul having a conversation with a skeptic who had left the church.

Paul: Why are you leaving?

Skeptic: Because the promises I heard were not delivered to me.

Paul: What promises are those?

Skeptic: That I would have peace and comfort. But I don't. I lost my father, I'm sorting through financial ruin, and I'm struggling with the same sin I had before I came to Christ.

Paul: It sounds like you are in the right place to grow.

Skeptic: What do you mean?

Paul: Losing a father is never easy. Nor is losing a whole family, which is what I faced in following Christ. Christ never said it would be easy, but he did say he would be with us all the way. As to your financial ruin, I can relate. I traveled many places, practically penniless, and had to learn the hard lesson of contentment. Believe me, I know it's a hard lesson. It isn't learned overnight, but Christ promises to provide our essentials until our earthly timetable is up. Stick to your obedience and walk in wisdom. But the sin issue takes even harder work. Your will and mine need constant upkeep and discipline. The

Holy Spirit will help us, but we must cooperate. Take the sins in your life, one at a time, and figure out a strategy to begin changing your beliefs and shaping your desires in those areas. It works in time, but we mustn't make excuses.

Skeptic: And what if it doesn't work?

Paul: I've seen it work. And, besides, what do you have to lose? Your father cannot return, your financial troubles will still with you, and in your character struggles, you will be powerless without Christ. It sounds better to me to suffer with one who has suffered for us, than to suffer alone. Besides, he does much more than merely meet us in suffering. But you must journey a little longer to walk into those answers.

You see, the problem with Christianity is not a problem at all. We, as messengers, must be responsible not to project upon Christ a mindless faith filled with promises of certain success, physical well-being, or perpetual happy feelings that he never intended. That kind of message often makes immediate converts, but it also makes inevitable casualties. Christianity isn't a club to join, but a life to walk in. Real life. His life. And as we are promised

through the apostle Paul, "Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? [...] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:34b-35, 37).

(1) G.K. Chesterton, "What's Wrong with the World?", (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1910. Reprinted, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 37.

(2) "PBS: The Question of God" discussion transcript, September 16, 2004.

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