

**SEARCHING FOR GOD:
(3) WHAT DO I NEED IN ORDER TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO BELIEVE?**

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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PROLOGUE

I remember a time when Jim Stafford was on the Merv Griffin Show and Griffin asked him, "Jim, what is your religion?" Stafford answered, "Frisbeterian." Griffin said, "Presbyterian?" Stafford said, "No. Frisbeterian." Griffin asked, "What is a Frisbeterian?" Stafford replied, "We believe in Frisbees and when you die its like you sail up on a flat roof and never come down." Frisbeterian. On the other hand, surely there is more to life than just a flying disc?

SCRIPTURE

Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"
(Mark 9:24 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of choices, most of which are of little significance, such as what brand of toothpaste to buy. But there are choices which carry great weight, choices that have to do with what we believe about the meaning of life and how to live it, choices that can have an impact even beyond this lifetime.

If you've already made choices about what you believe then you probably arrived at your set of beliefs by one or more of six pathways that we examined last week. Each one has strengths and weaknesses that may help or hinder you in the search for truth. But what if you're not satisfied with your choices or you've yet to make your choices, where do you start?

You could start with philosophy. Then you would need to check out the nearly three hundred different philosophies from around the world.

You could start with religion. But there are over twenty major religions with at least 500,000 adherents. There are also a countless number of smaller religions.

Or you could start with the one person who has had more influence on what we believe about life, the world and God than any other person in the world. I am talking about Jesus of Nazareth. Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette has said:

“As the centuries pass the evidence is accumulating that, measured by His effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet.”¹

An examination of the life and teachings of Jesus will point us to a kind of faith that fulfills the best of the six spiritual pathways. This is a faith that is practical, time-honored, compelling, meaningful, spiritual and matches reality - in other words, a faith that makes sense. I can only make a summary presentation here but if this is new to you or you have a lot of questions then I urge to explore the matter further. Why not pick up a copy of Mark Mittelberg’s book, *Choosing Your Faith*, which is a recommended companion to this series?

1. PRACTICAL FAITH

If we look to Jesus we see that faith is not just a matter of believing God exists. Most people believe God exists. Ironically it takes a great deal of faith to *not* believe God exists.

Consider the case of world renowned philosopher Antony Flew who for nearly half a century was known as the world’s most notorious atheist. But in 2004 he changed his mind. He says:

There were two factors in particular that were decisive. One was my growing empathy with the insight of Einstein and other noted scientists that there had to be an Intelligence behind the integrated complexity of the physical Universe. The second was my own insight that the integrated complexity of life itself – which is far more complex than the physical Universe – can only be explained in terms of an Intelligent Source. I believe that the origin of life and reproduction simply cannot be explained from a biological standpoint despite numerous efforts to do so. . . . I think the origins of the laws of nature and of life and the Universe point clearly to an intelligent Source. The burden of proof is on those who argue to the contrary.”²

It is not surprising that most people recognize the existence of God. There is more than enough evidence to persuade us of this truth. But for many people, believing that God exists makes no practical difference in their lives. As nominal believers they are indistinguishable from nominal atheists. The brother of Jesus once commented, “Even demons believe that God exists, but it does them no good” (James2:19). He also said, “Faith by itself isn’t

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *American Historical Review*. As found in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 321.

²From an October 30, 2007 interview with Benjamin Wiker, Ph.D. in “tothe source” online magazine. Benjamin Wiker holds a Ph.D. in Theological Ethics from Vanderbilt University, and has taught at Marquette University, St. Mary's University (MN), Thomas Aquinas College (CA), and Franciscan University (OH).

enough. Unless it shows itself in action, it is useless" (17).

But Jesus challenges us with the joy and adventure of following him in everyday life. He was not the founder of a new religion *about* God but the facilitator of a new relationship *with* God. This is a practical faith that can make a difference in our world and in the lives of those around us.

2. TIME-TESTED FAITH

Looking to Jesus leads us to a Time-Tested Faith.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). As the unique Son of God he is the way for us to enter into an ongoing relationship with our Creator. As one who is the truth he changes our perceptions, and we begin to understand the realities about God, the world, and ourselves. And in Jesus we find life where previously there has been guilt, addiction, fear, and the prospect of death.

The claims of Christ have stood the test of time. If someone told you they believed they found peace with God and everlasting joy ever since they put a stewed tomato in their sneaker, would you do the same? Probably not. After all, there is no evidence to support the claim and only one person was making it. But there is a substantial amount of historical evidence to support the claims of Christ as well as the testimony of hundreds of millions of people in history and nearly two billion people today who claim peace with God because of their faith in Jesus Christ. If Christ is the way, the truth and the life, then nothing could be more important in this life than our response to him.

3. COMPELLING FAITH

Jesus is the most compelling figure in history because of the claim that he came back from the dead, that is, was resurrected. But saying that Christ is risen does not make it so. It must match the facts.

Barbara Johnson observed a hand-lettered sign nailed to a telephone pole that said, "Lost dog with three legs, blind in left eye, missing right ear, tail broken, and recently castrated. Answers to the name of Lucky."

Just because you call a dog "lucky" doesn't mean it *is* lucky. Just because you say someone has come back from the dead does not make it true. So how do we know Jesus rose from the dead? There is a great deal of evidence in connection with the empty tomb, the appearances and eye-witness accounts. But for our purposes this morning I am going to focus on just one type of evidence.

One of the most persuasive arguments that Christ rose from the dead is the effect it had on his followers then and now. What was it that changed a band of frightened, cowardly disciples into people of courage and conviction? What was it that changed Peter from one who,

the night before the crucifixion, was so afraid for his own skin that he three times denied he even knew Jesus, into a roaring lion of faith? Some fifty days later Peter risked his life by standing up in front of a crowd and saying he had seen Jesus alive.

It must be remembered that Peter preached his stirring Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem. He was not in Galilee, miles away where no one could verify the facts and where his ringing statements might go unchallenged. He was in Jerusalem, where the events took place and in the one place in the world most hostile to his claims. Only the resurrection of Christ could have produced this change.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ validates the person of Christ. It authenticates that he is who he claims to be. For what person in history has said, "My enemies are going to kill me but within three days I will be seen alive again" and actually pull it off? Only one! And until someone else comes along and duplicates what Jesus did we need to give our attention to Jesus. He is the unique and authoritative expert on life, the world and God.

4. MEANINGFUL FAITH

Looking to Jesus leads us to a Meaningful Faith.

The late scholar and evangelist Paul Little said that because of Jesus Christ:

“...We know with certainty that God exists, what he is like and how we may know him in personal experience; the universe takes on meaning and purpose, and it is possible to experience the living God in contemporary life.”

If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he is alive today, ready to enter and change those who invite him into their lives. Millions now living bear uniform witness that their lives have been transformed by Jesus Christ. You could be one of them.

5. SPIRITUAL FAITH

Looking to Jesus leads us to a Spiritual Faith.

Of course, most faiths talk about spiritual matters but I am referring to Spirit with a capital "S" as in the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that those who trust in him would receive the Holy Spirit. This means we can be in contact with God any time, any where. We can be guided by God any time, any where. But this guidance is never in contradiction to what we call God's revealed will in Scripture.

I find it interesting that the prophets not only spoke about the Holy Spirit they also spoke under the influence of the Spirit. The Apostle Peter puts it this way, "No prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21 NRSV). Indeed, we can say the entire Bible is the work of the Holy Spirit. This

is what we mean when we talk about the inspiration of Scripture. On the one hand, there were over 40 different authors of the books of the Bible writing over a span of 1,400 years in a wide variety of circumstances, having different writing styles and points of view. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit inspired these various authors and so superintended the process that the end result was a unique and authoritative witness to the will and purpose of God.

Have you ever finished reading an enjoyable book and then said to yourself, “I wish I could meet and talk with the author”? In a sense, when it comes to the Bible, this is a very real possibility for us. No, you cannot telephone or e-mail the Holy Spirit but through prayer you can ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand and apply the teachings of Scripture to your life.

6. REASONABLE FAITH

“What is faith?” asked the Sunday School teacher. One little boy shouted out, “Believing something you know isn’t true.”

It is not surprising to find a critic that defines faith this way. But sadly, many Christians seem to hold this view. Yet Jesus points us to a faith that is reasonable, one that does not require you to check your brains at the door in order to believe.

Mark Mittelberg, author of *Choosing Your Faith*, tells us that faith in Christ:

“...is not blind trust or an irrational leap of faith. Rather, it is built on reliable data, history and facts, as well as authentic experience. It’s not just soothing and helpful; it’s really true.”

CONCLUSION

The historian Philip Schaff wrote:

This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon. Without science and learning, He shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined. He spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great [people] of ancient and modern times.

But in the final analysis, it does not matter what history says of Jesus or even what your family or friends say about Jesus as much as it matters what you say about Jesus. Who is Jesus to you?