

WHEN YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM YOUR MOST TROUBLING THOUGHTS - Part One

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WHEN FAITH LOSES ITS FOCUS

Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone at the airport whom you had never seen before? It's really an awkward experience. You just stand there and try to smile at every person getting off the plane. You don't want to appear unfriendly, so you try to look every person in the eye - not long enough to appear to be some homicidal maniac - but long enough so they might *see* you are expecting some kind of reaction in their *eyes* if they are the one you are there to meet.

Now, just suppose *I'm* the one getting off the plane. Someone is supposed to be there to pick me up. But nobody has a sign and nobody comes forward in any way. Suppose I'm just about to *leave* the airport when someone comes up and says, "***You mean to tell me you're Don Horban?***" "Yes I am." "No way, man. You aren't at all what I had pictured in my mind. I thought you'd be taller and much younger. I thought you would be speaking Ukrainian and giving out tracts to all the pagans in the airport. You're not ***at all*** what I had pictured in my mind!"

Or what if my contact person - my ride - had so fixed this false picture of my identity in his mind ***he wouldn't even believe that I was Don Horban?*** What if he was so convinced that his mental picture of me was accurate, he wouldn't even bother taking me to my destination? What if he concluded that Don Horban didn't even ***arrive*** at the airport that day?

The *ideas* - the *pictures* - we make of any person have a great deal to do with our *reception* of that person. They also have a great deal to do with our *expectations* of that person. And they have a great deal to do with the *quality of relationship* we have with that person as well.

Suppose I *think* a person is absolutely honest and trustworthy but he's really a crook and a shyster? I may put totally unfounded confidence in you and you may rob me blind and break my heart. Or suppose you *are* a wonderfully honest, caring person, but I think you are a hard-nosed crook? I will never put the confidence in you that you deserve. I will never receive the benefits of the rich friendship and help and advice and companionship you could offer. In the end I would tragically short-change myself.

This is a series of teachings on the darkness of *doubt*. Many doubts have unexpected sources. We usually think of *intellectual doubts* - doubts that arise because of lack of evidence for faith. We're going to consider those kinds of doubts later on in this series. But that is only *one* source of doubt. My guess is it is not even the *main* or *most common* source of doubt.

Many of our doubts about God come from exactly the same kind of problem described in our opening story. For some reason or another believers get into their heads such a wrong concept of God that it actually comes *between* them and the God of the Bible. Their *picture* of God actually hinders their *faith* in God.

And then here's what happens next: Since they don't *know* they are developing a false picture of God, they blame *God* rather than their *faulty picture*, little realizing that God isn't like that at all. Because they don't *understand God as He is* they can't *trust Him as they should*.

There are some critically important points for us to remember regarding doubts that arise from faith out of focus. If we don't remember them we won't fight the battle with these doubts where it actually needs to be fought.

1) **DOUBT IS NOT ALWAYS THE SAME AS UNBELIEF**

If a person has a faulty picture of God he or she will, sooner or later, be plagued by doubt - a sense of the *unreality* of the God he is trying to worship. But the problem isn't *unbelief*. This person *does* believe. The problem is not *lack* of belief, but rather *believing the wrong things*.

In other words, sincerity won't guarantee sturdy faith. Inaccurate beliefs won't hold up a genuine faith. The real problem with faith out of focus needs to be clearly understood. It isn't a problem of *doubting genuine beliefs* (which is the way we usually define doubt - i.e. "I believe Jesus rose from the dead, but I'm afraid my belief won't stand up to solid evidence). The real problem with a faulty picture of God isn't *doubting genuine truths* but, rather, *believing false ones*. It's building your faith on inaccurate assumptions that won't hold the weight of Scriptural examination.

In other words, the problem isn't that the person at the airport didn't show up. The problem is I wasn't expecting the right person because I held false assumptions about who was coming.

2) HOW FALSE PICTURES OF GOD DEVELOP

Primarily there are two ways in which false presuppositions about God get established in our minds:

a) ***First, we can hold on to pre-conversion ways of thinking about God after we have come to Christ.***

Instead of rooting out pre-Christian concepts and worldviews, we can actually leave them undisturbed until they quietly begin to mingle with our Christian experience of God. Sometimes this is tolerated because of ***other areas of dramatic change in outward behavior since conversion*** (perhaps I quit smoking or stopped cheating on my wife or started going to church every Sunday, etc.).

Because of the attention given to these ***outward*** changes of behavior, attention is diverted away from areas where ***inward thoughts and ideas*** are left untouched by God's revelation of truth.

This problem is becoming increasingly common in the church. People come to faith for all sorts of reasons. Frequently they come to Jesus because they are told they will find help for some particular need. The marriage is falling apart. We need God's help. My teenager tried to kill himself. We need to give this situation to God. I'm out of work and lonely. Jesus will be a provider and companion.

But the problem is none of those reasons will be big enough to ***replace wrong concepts of faith with correct ones.*** These people may be very ***sincere***, but they are looking for something other than ***genuine conversion to Christ.***

Here are the motives for genuine conversion to Christ.

- a) ***I am eternally lost and separated from a holy God and can do nothing to remedy this situation by myself.*** This is true whether my marriage is falling apart or I have the happiest home in Newmarket. It is true whether I am unemployed or have a billion dollars in the bank. If my lostness isn't my ***primary*** motive in coming to Christ, I will be starting my faith out on the wrong foot.
- b) ***My motive for doing anything I do in life is glorifying Jesus and building His kingdom.*** This is the thinking behind every resistance of sin and wickedness. If my primary concern is the opinion and approval of my friends I may, just by luck, make some wise decisions, but there will be nothing distinctly ***Christian*** about my choices.
- c) ***My understanding of moral and spiritual truth is objective and absolute rather than personal and subjective.*** For the Christian there is no such thing as a moral principle being ***true for you'*** or ***true for me.*** Relativism is, at its core, anti-Christian and will destroy any concept of genuine Christian faith.
- d) ***My relationship with self is consistently one of self-denial rather than self-fulfillment.*** It is right at the point of conversion, not some later quest for deeper spiritual life, that Jesus says, ***"If you want to follow Me - if you're even considering it - you must first of all take up your cross and deny yourself daily and follow me."***

Those are the concepts and motives that must replace everything else when a person comes to Christ for New Birth. If they are omitted or side-stepped genuine faith will become an impossibility sooner or later. If wrong presuppositions about how God acts are allowed to remain in tact when faith is first embraced they will incubate and proliferate like a foreign bacteria in the bloodstream. The professing Christian will end up, not so much with a ***renewed*** mind as a ***patched up*** mind. Doubts will always hound that kind of inauthentic faith.

But again, the problem wasn't that genuine faith was out of reach or didn't make sense. The problem was this seeker wasn't looking for the same God as has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. This person isn't doubting ***genuine*** faith. He has never even ***tried*** genuine faith on God's terms. He has simply found ***his own man-made faith*** unable to stand up to life.

The Scriptural picture of this kind of start into the Christian life is best summed up in God's instructions to His people in the Old Testament as they entered the Promised Land:

Numbers 33:55 - "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell."

The reason those historic details of the year 9 B.C. are recorded for Christians in the year 2016 is **they picture the process of the establishing of new life patterns - of how a renewed mind is formed**. Any old thought patterns and presuppositions from the pre-Christian state of mind that aren't plucked out and renounced **right at the point of conversion** will not only **deceive** but will **tear down and destroy** the possibility of genuine faith taking hold in the life.

- b) **Second, the Christian mind and genuine faith can be corrupted and invalidated by the entrance of unchristian presuppositions after coming to faith in Jesus Christ.**

Primarily this happens through the media, materialism, and unexamined friendships. There is constant pressure on our minds in two specific areas:

- i) The pressure to embrace **tolerance** over **Biblical revelation**. In short, you have no business, as a genuine Christian, tolerating anything God doesn't tolerate. This creates a huge problem for Christian purity. The media doesn't function with any moral absolutes capable of overriding mere social acceptability. It's not just that Christians are governed by different rules. That misses the point entirely. The Christian's standards move along a entirely different plane than social acceptability.

Please let me move into a slightly different side-bar just for a few minutes. I've never heard this dealt with in any teaching I'm aware of and I don't remember reading this in any Christian book. Try to imagine a wicked act being described on any news outlet or talk show that **didn't** involve either **violence/ill-treatment of others** or **intolerance** of someone else's rights. So just remove **social injustice** or **intolerance**. Are there any wicked acts apart from these in the news?

Then something else is happening at the same time. Christians are getting increasingly bad press for focusing on their **"pet sins"** of homosexuality, transgenderism, common-law relationships, and some others. And Christians are starting to actually feel guilty about talking about these things because they are considered fundamentalist and rather red-necked for doing so.

"After all," the cry goes out against us, "what harm is the gay couple doing **to you**? How are **you** hurt by so and so wanting to be a man or a woman? How is it hurting **you** if other loving couples live together without the covenant of marriage?"

Then comes the clincher. **"There are more serious wrongs to deal with in this world than your archaic views of sex and marriage! There's war and bullying and economic injustice of the wealthy of this world against the poor!"**

Those words immediately have their intended affect. They make us feel petty and small-minded. They make us feel we really aren't global Christians at all.

And I want to argue as strongly as I can that this isn't a fair argument at all. I want to argue Christians aren't being small-minded with their **petty sins**. I think Christians **do** talk of some sins more than others. But it's not because their uncaring of other issues. Their reason is more noble than that. And I wish the truth were shouted more often.

Christians speak so much of **certain personal sins** because only **those** sins - those sins now totally

accepted socially and those sins carrying the added stamp of approval by secular legalization - only *those* sins are ***definable as sins solely by divine revelation plus nothing.***

There is no longer any other reason for our world to reject these personal sins other than the “say so” of God. And smart Christians know they have the best chance of ***defining what makes sin sin with just such activities.***

Now, remember where we are. I was saying a doubting mind can arise by genuine faith being corrupted by a secular mind-set after conversion. Then I said this could happen in ***two ways.*** The ***first,*** which we've just considered, was the acceptance of ***tolerance*** over ***Biblical revelation.*** Now on to the ***second:***

- ii) The pressure to ***conform*** to a world that Jesus Christ consistently calls His disciples to ***renounce*** and remain ***separated*** from in the most absolute sense of the word. This world is a very ***jealous god.*** It calls all of us to worship its styles and fashions, to dance to its music, to love its stars and celebrities, to live for its dreams and goals of success and pleasure.

Its success in seducing Christians lies in its ability to make all of its concessions seem ***small and of little eternal consequence.*** In that way, those being deceived can mock those who try to warn them that they are merely being petty and legalistic - ***“Like God’s going to send me to hell just for sleeping with one woman before I’m married?”***

And so, little by little, the professing Christian ends up with a mix-and-match kind of faith - a lifeless and joyless blend of some kind of Christian religion held in the back of the mind, but with no ***real understanding of how to make it work powerfully in daily life.***

And in that kind of shallow never-never land, doubt and emptiness are certain to emerge and thrive and swallow up whatever remains of genuine faith.

So false views of God emerge either when ***false presuppositions about God aren’t renounced at conversion*** or when ***false presuppositions about God and faith are carelessly allowed to enter the life after conversion.***

Remember, when you try to live in two worlds, you find the best of neither and the worst of each. This is the emptiest and most joyless way to live.

3) **WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO FAITH OUT OF FOCUS?**

Whatever the cause, what can be done once faith is a hybrid between Biblical Christianity and worldly thinking? What can be done with this kind of sterile, ***mule-like*** Christianity?

- a) For people who never made a deep enough start when they made their own profession of faith there comes, at some point, the most difficult decision of all. Sooner or later, they will come to the point of either quitting all together, because they find the faith they possess not adequate to deal with the problems and questions they have, or they will have to ***go back to square one and make a proper start of seriously following the real God for the right reasons.***

This takes incredible humility. If our church has a thousand people who would at least claim it as their church home, there are probably scores of those people who have never seriously taken this first step of genuine conversion properly. There are ***young people*** who are tag-alongs to their parents faith. They wouldn't even come to church if they didn't have to.

There are ***young adults*** who, in an effort to boast of a more sophisticated faith than the previous generation of old-timers, have become so worldly minded that the only hope is to abandon whatever mixture of worldliness and watered down Christianity they possess and humbly come to Jesus for the real thing. There are ***husbands and fathers*** who are honestly far more enamored with worldly success and power than Jesus, but who want their wives to be happy so they do the one hour thing on Sunday morning.

All these religious people need the same thing - ***genuine, transforming, God-saturated-to-the-roots conversion***. Not many will have the humility or courage to do that. That's the tragedy.

- b) For people who are honestly trying every day to follow Jesus with a pure, sincere heart, the ***long term need*** is to keep training the heart to close the door on any habit or lifestyle that brings false presuppositions into the renewed mind.

When we were kids we used to take magazines in dentist's offices and find some picture of a beautiful model onto which we would black out teeth, add a beard and some warts. This is exactly what this world wants to do with your picture of God. He gets painted as everything from a tolerant old man who just wants everyone to love each other and have a good time, to a cruel sadist who finds people who have failed and grinds them into powder.

Never let anybody - not your church - not your pastor - not your teacher - not any book or film - and above all, not some media celebrity, feed you wrong information about God. Because the picture that gets painted in your mind is the God you will, in fact, try to love and worship. And there's nothing easier to create, yet harder to trust, than a god of your own making.