

COHERENT CHRISTIANITY

A More Liberating, Less Traveled Way

RONALD PERRITT

© 2019

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,
www.nurturingfaith.net.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-060-9

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Acknowledgments

Words cannot adequately express my appreciation to the many men and women who have been guiding lights on my Christian journey. I do want to acknowledge four very special people: Rev. George Haile, my pastor for 27 years, who was never afraid to address the hard questions and stand for Christian values; Dr. Glenn Hinson, who helped me balance the spiritual and intellectual sides of faith; and Dr. Marcus Borg, whose writing helped clarify my ideas about the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. Last, but certainly not least, I want to acknowledge my lovely wife, Patsy, who has encouraged me in this work, and who continues to inspire me by how she exhibits the Christian way with such ease and grace.

INTRODUCTION

I almost gave up on Christianity. Growing up in a conservative Protestant church, I was taught a lot of ideas about God, the Bible, salvation, and what was called faith. I never questioned most of this until I got older and began to really study the Bible. I slowly discovered that much of what I had been taught did not make sense in that it was internally inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. My childhood theology could not answer even the simplest questions about prayer or how to know what was authoritative.

I was taught that God loved the whole world, and yet this same God destroyed practically the whole world with a flood, sent a death angel to murder children, and commanded people to commit genocide. I was confused by the idea that the Bible is God's timeless truth. In one place eating shrimp and catfish was strictly forbidden, yet in other places it was fine. How can that be timeless truth?

Some passages seemed to be arbitrarily chosen to keep women subservient to men in church and in marriage. Sin was a big deal. Jesus' death was mentioned often, mostly as a payment to appease God's anger over all our sins. If this was the reason he died, how could Jesus have neglected to explain this to his followers, or did his disciples feel this was not important enough to record along with his other teachings?

Today, if a parent of three children arranged for one to be brutally murdered, and tried to justify this action by saying it was necessary to be able to love the other two, that parent should at least be locked away in an institution. Am I to believe that God's moral standards are less than what we would expect from a human parent?

Jesus taught that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Was my church in the forefront of advocating for social justice? Sadly no, but it didn't really matter because all the church members believed they were saved regardless.

This version of Christianity just didn't make sense to me. I found it hard to believe that Jesus didn't teach a coherent understanding of the nature of God, how God interacts with us, and what God expects of us in this life.

When I asked for help in understanding these types of apparent conflicts, I was often told that I just had to accept everything on faith, that God's ways are not our ways. Some years later I read a story dating back to 1202 about a priest and a layman standing on a dock watching the ships come in. The layman said to the priest, "If the earth is flat like you teach, why is it that as the ship approaches the dock, I first see the top of the sail, then the deck and then the whole ship. If the earth is really flat, why don't I see all of the ship all the time?" The priest replied, "My son, there are just some things we will never understand."

I learned from this simple story that the premises or presuppositions or hypotheses we start with often limit the possible answers available for any question. A good hypothesis is validated by empirical data and leads to answers that are internally consistent and make sense.

In the physical world, there are many events and processes that cannot be established with absolute certainty. The Big Bang Theory, the theory of evolution, the age of the earth, and so on are hypotheses about how things happened based on the available empirical evidence. As the evidence changes, however, the hypotheses change to reflect the new information.

In the spiritual world, Christian church leaders have not been comfortable with uncertainty and have thus developed doctrines and creeds presented as absolute fact or truth. These doctrines are actually hypotheses taught as fact. Following are three examples.

First, the Catholic Church proposed, based on a particular interpretation of scripture, that the earth was at the center of the solar system and that the sun and stars rotated around the earth. This hypothesis was taught as fact until the empirical evidence to the contrary became so overwhelming that the church could no longer support it.

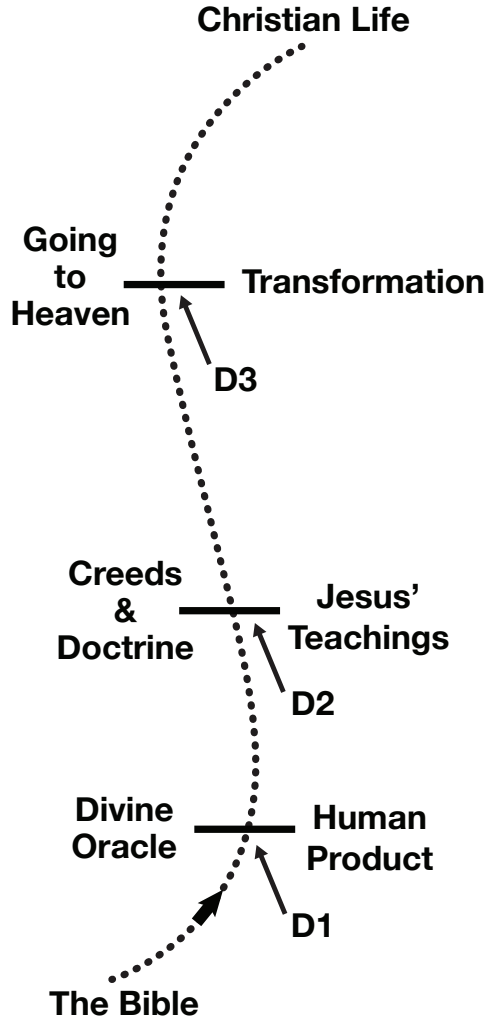
Second, the church hypothesized, based on a particular literal interpretation of the birth narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, that Jesus' mother, Mary, was a virgin at his birth and remained so after his birth. This hypothesis, however, has strong evidence to the contrary found in scripture:

- The earliest gospel, Mark, makes no mention of an unusual birth of Jesus. It is hard to imagine how such an important event could have escaped his attention.
- The Apostle Paul, who wrote within a few decades of Jesus' death and years before the appearance of Mark's gospel, makes no mention of a miraculous birth. Paul even says that Jesus "descended from David according to the flesh," which means by a normal birth, and was "declared to be the Son of God . . . by resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:3-4).
- Mark's gospel also describes an event involving Jesus' family: "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him (Jesus) and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you'" (Mark 3:31-32). The writer of the earliest gospel seems to have had no problem with Jesus having brothers and sisters, which means Mary had other children.
- John's gospel makes no mention of the birth of Jesus. According to John, Jesus apparently descended to earth as a supernatural incarnation of God in adult human form.

Third, the Christian church—both Catholic and Protestant—has taught, based on a particular interpretation of scripture, mainly from the Hebrew Bible, that God interacts with humanity directly through rewards and punishments. As we shall see later, this idea is refuted by at least one book in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus actually challenged this hypothesis and offered a different way of understanding how God interacts with us, one that is actually supported by an abundance of empirical evidence.

As we seek to develop a coherent Christianity, we must understand that the historic creeds and doctrines widely accepted as fact in the past are actually just hypotheses. There are other interpretations of scripture that lead to other hypotheses that, for me, are much more meaningful and no less challenging.

The following diagram illustrates one “decision path” that, for me, has led to a coherent understanding of Christianity. This path, illustrated here with the key decision points (D1, D2, D3) shown, is based on the following idea.



Suppose I had the opportunity to live under the direction of a very important and powerful person. The potential benefits are great, but there are also serious risks. What kind of questions would I have about this person? There are at least three critical ones.

First, what is the character of this person? More specifically, is he kind, patient, compassionate, honest, and forgiving *or* hateful, ill-tempered, and vengeful? If the answer is that the person is cruel and vengeful, I would relate to him out of fear but not love.

Second, how does this person interact with other people? Does she use coercion, rewards and punishments, and preferential treatment, or does she treat all people equally with dignity and respect? If this person acts capriciously and gives preferential treatment, I would try to placate any possible anger she would have and hopefully encourage favorable treatment. Many religious groups in the past developed sacrificial systems for this purpose.

The answers to these first two questions would shape my expectations of how this person might act toward me and respond to my requests for help.

Finally, what does this person expect of me? Is it possible for me to meet those expectations, and is this person going to help me succeed in meeting them?

Anyone contemplating a genuine personal relationship with and commitment to God should be able to find coherent answers to these critical questions. It makes sense to consider the following questions as they relate to the person of God:

1. What is the character of God?
2. How does God interact with humanity?
3. What does God expect of me?

The answer to each of these questions should complement the answers to the other ones. Our foundational and only significant document for answering these questions is the Bible.