

## From Missionary Bible Translator to Agnostic

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<http://www.geocities.com/kenandcharlene/Testimony.htm>

# 1 Purpose of this testimonial

Whenever I've shared with Christians the story of my deconversion from Christianity, I have been met various combinations of fascination, surprise and disapproval. Often there is an assumption that if I had embraced a slightly different brand of Christianity, I could have avoided coming down this path. It was because of my wrong ideas about Christianity, or because I wasn't truly a believer in the first place, or because I did not seek God earnestly enough, that I ended up abandoning the faith. Sometimes when I provide reasons for my doubts, the interrogator will summarily dismiss them and ask, "So what's the *real* reason you left Christianity?" Most believers want to know what it is that brought me to this point. Though they do not always express it openly, I often sense their conviction that my disbelief must stem from an inward moral flaw they would like to uncover.

The purpose of this paper is to open a window to my life as a Christian and my reasons for leaving the faith, allowing others to evaluate the authenticity of my former faith and the motivations for my doubts. To that end, I have liberally sprinkled my story with a healthy--some might say excessive--dose of personal prayers, correspondence and reflection. My hope is that this will help some of my family members and friends understand, if not appreciate, how I have come to where I am. Additionally, I would like to provide encouragement for those who recognize many of the problems of Christianity but who struggle to give wing to their doubts. I do not believe this will cause committed believers to leave the faith, but it is my hope that it will aid those who have already begun to question the faith on their own.

Based on the words of a Christian friend with whom I've been meeting monthly to discuss our respective beliefs, a case can be made for the effectiveness of a testimonial-style approach versus a context-free treatise on a subject as personal as faith:

The topics we cover in our discussions sometimes make me question my faith. But what has a greater impact on it and brings deeper questions and pain to my heart is when I hear you say that you have sought God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and not found Him.<sup>[1]</sup>

A chronological recounting of my life story provides the framework for this document. I have interspersed editorial reflections of limited length at various points in the storyline. For extended arguments in support of my views, please read the appendixes in the

companion document. For those with limited reading time who simply want to understand my journey, the first document will suffice, but those who wish to engage in written or oral debate with me are requested to read both documents in their entirety. Depending on how many responses I receive, I may or may not be able to engage with everyone, but I will make it a priority to answer at least family members and close friends.

There are several flavors of agnosticism, so I'll take the opportunity up front to clear up any uncertainty as to my present position. I consider myself to be an atheistic-leaning agnostic, meaning that I suspect there is no God, while leaving open the possibility that God does exist.

Though I have thought about undertaking this project for some time, the immediate inspiration for taking it up now has come from my recent reading of a quite similar story by Kendall Hobbs<sup>ii</sup>[2]. I highly recommend it to anyone who finds my testimonial in the least interesting.

## **2 Life as an Evangelical Christian**

### **2.1 Growing up years: Unquestioned faith**

I was born in Ethiopia in 1968 to evangelical missionary parents. My mother's father was an independent fundamental Baptist pastor, whom I remember to be a very kind and warm grandfather. When she was nine, my mother vowed to devote her life to God as a missionary and to abstain from all alcohol and movies. She kept these vows until her death from cancer five years ago at the age of 63. I have never met a more selfless individual, and I will always respect the life she lived. She began her missionary career in 1960 as a single nurse in the mountains of Ethiopia, traveling by mule to treat those in need of medical care.

My father was reared in the Conservative Baptist denomination, which was somewhat less fundamentalist than my mother's church, but was very evangelical nonetheless. He built a house by himself at the age of 16, sold it and gave the profits to missionary causes. Having grown up during the Depression, he learned to be industrious, hard working and devoted to the causes he believed in. He joined Sudan Interior Mission (now simply SIM) and traveled to Ethiopia in 1960 as a building construction engineer, overseeing projects such as Bible schools, hospitals, bridges, missionary housing and seminaries. He met my mother in 1965 and married in 1967.

One of my earliest memories is of a frightening nighttime thunderstorm when I was four while on furlough in California. I called to my mother, who came and comforted me, saying that Jesus would protect me, and inviting me to ask Jesus into my heart. Trustingly, I prayed a prayer to accept Jesus as my personal savior. I don't know how much this decision affected my life at such an early age--I couldn't claim a dramatic conversion from a profligate life, though I did understand that I was a sinner and that I

needed to accept Jesus' sacrifice to take away my sins so I could be with God. I was committed to the faith I had been taught, and read the New Testament and nearly half the Old Testament when I was ten years old.

But I was a typical kid, squabbling with my younger sisters while growing up in Ethiopia, California, Arkansas, Liberia, Oregon and Nigeria. I attended a mission boarding school in Nigeria as an early teen, and one teacher in particular impressed me with his sincerity and love. He lived a disciplined life, running with his dog in the countryside for half an hour each day and spending a great deal of time with his wife. He often emphasized to his students the need for us to talk with God and to relate to him even more personally than with our closest friends. I can remember distinctly the first time I took his advice to heart. I was lying on my bed trying to get to sleep and started pouring out my heart to God, telling him my feelings, praying for all my friends, and letting him know how much I appreciated him until two in the morning. The joy that I experienced at knowing that I was communicating with the very One who had made the entire universe was exhilarating. I continued for many years maintaining an almost daily time of prayer and reading the Bible, even though it wasn't always as remarkable as it was when I first began at the age of 14. I sought to please God in my thoughts, actions and words, and even my sisters noticed a significant turnaround in my life as I promoted peace instead of dissension in the family. However, I understood from Paul's epistles that God's acceptance of me was based entirely on his love for me, his sacrifice on my behalf, and not at all on any of my personal accomplishments or righteousness.

Partly through the viewing of the missionary movie *Peace Child* during my ninth grade year, I became convinced that God wanted me to bring the gospel to those who had never heard of Jesus. I particularly sensed God's call to translate the Bible into one of over 3,000 languages in the world in which it was not available.

High school was a difficult but character-forming time of life. I have very fond memories of the tight-knit group of Christian classmates at the missionary boarding school I attended through ninth grade. My sisters did not share my enthusiasm for the rigors of the school, but my awakening to the place God had for me in his world, along with the fellowship of like-minded friends, made the strict regulations of the school and the absence of my parents more tolerable. During tenth grade I transferred to another Christian missionary school in Nigeria, this time a relatively large day school with a much greater mix of religious backgrounds among the students. I missed the cocoon of the boarding school, but I continued to grow in my knowledge of God and the Bible. I read a good deal on young-earth creationism and wrote a private manuscript defending creationism against evolution.

When I was 16 our family moved to Arkansas, where I attended a public high school for my junior year. You can imagine how much like a fish out of water I felt there. I recall holing myself up in my room many evenings, listening to songs on the local Christian radio station, and weeping myself to sleep. During my whole year there I knew no one who shared my zeal for God. I did have some friends, but I longed to have someone I could open up to and share the experiences of my faith with.

Next we moved to East Texas, where my father became involved in a US-based technical support mission organization. For my senior year I attended a public high school again, but my experience this time was considerably more positive. Having already adjusted somewhat to American culture, I was able to make more friends and was known as one of the most devout believers in my class. Following my parents' example, I refrained from attending movie theaters, though I did break with them in listening to Christian rock 'n roll. As another example of my rigidity, I still recall with pain the evening I invited a committed but less legalistic Christian girl to the annual coronation, which included a dance. I was convinced that dancing was not appropriate for serious Christians (I refused to listen to secular music because of its immoral messages, let alone dance to it), so I sat at the dinner table while my date danced with others. A teacher in attendance asked me why I wasn't dancing, and when I explained my reasons, she said she could see the logic in abstaining from dubious activities like drinking, but not dancing.

One of my best friends that year was a Mormon, so I read extensively on Mormonism from an evangelical perspective, finding numerous faults in the Latter Day Saints' scriptures and discussing them with my friend into the wee hours of the morning. After pointing out a number of historical and theological flaws in Mormonism, he confided in me, "Religion is a bitch." I responded that no, it was clear the universe was created by a Personal Being, and so it was a no-brainer that we needed to give him our allegiance. I never did convince him to leave his faith, but I became more confident in the moorings of my own faith. I did agree to read an apologetic book he gave me entitled *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* and was able to find enough faults in its reasoning to be able to dismiss it quite readily. It did not occur to me to be so critical of Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, a popular evangelical apologetic work I read during that same year.

Though we were not Southern Baptists, our family attended a local Southern Baptist church during our time in East Texas. I invited to the church at least one high school student who subsequently accepted Jesus as his savior. The summer after high school graduation, I went with a couple friends to share our with people in parks and door-to-door, inviting them to believe in Jesus and attend church. In doing so, I felt that we were in the center of God's will and experienced a sense of euphoria as a result. I carried out this kind of direct evangelism a few other times, but I was never a regular at it.

Although our family was wary of charismatic and Pentecostal experiences, I did seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a tent during a Christian music festival put on by the organization founded by the late singer-songwriter Keith Green. I experienced a flood of emotion, but never was aware that I was supernaturally speaking in tongues. Thereafter I remained open to the charismatic branch of the evangelical faith, but never considered myself to be part of that camp. Theologically, I became inclined to call myself an "evangelical ecumenicist," focusing on what united the evangelical faith and not taking strong stands on points of disagreement. I continued to distrust non-Protestant and liberal faiths, but I did consider myself to be a little more ecumenical than my parents.

I chose to attend LeTourneau University, a technology-focused non-denominational Christian college in Longview, Texas. I was still interested in Bible translation, but having written to Wycliffe Bible Translators (the organization I was later to join) concerning my dual interest in computer science and biblical studies, they recommended I pursue a degree in computer science, as these skills could be useful not only in Bible translation but in a number of other endeavors. So I studied computer science and engineering, while taking at least one Bible course per semester. I enjoyed my experience there, though my social skills were probably stunted by my obsession with good grades and by the paucity of females on campus.

During spring break of my sophomore year, I sensed a dryness in my relationship with God and found it difficult to keep focused on God while praying. I decided to begin typing my prayers daily on the computer, enabling me to gather my thoughts and avoid daydreaming. My relationship with God was revitalized as a result, and I kept up this practice off and on until I left the faith.

## **2.2 Crisis #1**

It was during my junior year of college that I began paying attention to difficult passages in the Old Testament in my personal readings, some that troubled me for ethical reasons, and others that seemed to be internally contradictory. For a while I disregarded them, thinking there must be a good explanation, and who was I anyway to question God (or was it really God)? But enough of these difficulties built up in my mind that I decided to face up to them, so I began in Genesis, listening to the Bible on cassette and reading the text, writing down any passage that troubled me or appeared contradictory. Appendix C contains a partial list of these verses. During spring break, however, after I had reached the book of Jeremiah (over half-way through the Bible), I met an attractive young lady at a Bible college I was visiting. We struck up a long-distance relationship, which, looking back now, helped take my mind off my doubts and likely provided a good incentive to dismiss them. Whatever the explanation, I was able to regain what I considered to be a full-fledged, robust biblical faith, at least for a time. Though we dated for ten months, I never did kiss her, wanting to reserve that honor for my wife!

During my college years I had been introduced to the evangelical news and opinion magazine *Christianity Today* and became an avid reader. I felt it helped broaden my perspective and provided a global context for my personal faith. In contrast to my earlier beliefs, the magazine staff accepted the earth's great antiquity while rejecting evolution, which helped temper my strict young-earth creationism. In my senior year I wrote a paper on the age of the earth for my Pentateuch Bible class, advocating a day-age theory to square the Genesis account with an old earth. It was a book by Christian geologist and old-earth creationist Davis Young (!) that convinced me I had been wrong about the age of the earth and that my reasons for believing in a young earth had been merely illusory. However, I never entertained the thought that evolution as an over-arching concept could be true, considering it to be simply preposterous, not to mention unbiblical. I now feel that this transition to old-earth creationism was significant in that it moved me more

toward a tendency to rely on physical and historical evidence to interpret the Bible rather than the other way around.

Out of a desire to serve God and to break out of my social shell, I chose to become the director of student ministries for the college student body during my senior year. It was a stretching experience as I helped organize teams to restore run-down houses in town, plan student mission trips to Mexico, conduct worship meetings, etc. Despite the pace of my activities, I remained consistent in praying, seeking God and reading the Bible on a daily basis.

## **2.3 Crisis #2**

My second crisis of faith began later in my senior year, shortly after I broke up with my girlfriend. I had already signed up for a one-year certificate program at Columbia Biblical Seminary (now Columbia International University), a conservative, missions-oriented school in Columbia, SC. I was aware it required assent to biblical inerrancy in order to graduate, so I pretty much gave up on the idea of attending there.

The summer after graduating from college, I continued working as a short-term computer programmer for my parent's mission based in Charlotte, NC, as I had done the previous two summers. I visited a Unitarian-Universalist church and talked with a leader, asking questions like, "Do you believe God listens to prayer?" He said he'd like to think that God is out there somewhere listening when we pray, but he wasn't sure. That was profoundly disappointing to me--I wanted the assurance of a personal God who could hear us and orchestrate events for ultimate good--so I never returned to that church. During this time, in August 1990, I wrote the following summary of my ideas about God, ideas I naively believed to be self-evident without scriptural revelation:

God is that Being than which none greater or equal can possibly exist.

God has made all that ever has existed or that ever will exist.

Man, whom God loves intimately, is the center of and purpose for God's creation.

God possesses all good qualities to an infinite extent and manifests them to the degree that will bring about the least possible conflict among the differing good qualities, which include:

love, justice, mercy, grace, purity, compassion, humor, esthetic appeal, creativity, fairness, faithfulness, longsuffering, gentleness, power, free will, knowledge, wisdom, serenity, generosity, self-existence, indivisibility, immortality, joy, sympathy, and comfort.

God created man for the purpose of pleasing himself.

God created man with the will to choose whether or not to fulfill that purpose.

God's allowance for man to choose required the creation of options which please God and options which do not please him.

The options which do not please God constitute that which is known as evil.

God has allowed enough evil, suffering, injustice, ambiguity, and pleasure to exist in the cosmos so that the choice between pleasing God and not pleasing God is a choice that requires consideration, for only choices that require consideration are meaningful to God.

No human has without fail chosen to please God.

For man to please God requires that man make the choice to do so, but beyond that man can fulfill no other requirements. All other requirements are fulfilled only through God's enabling.

These requirements include:

praising God for who he is; thanking him for his favor in all its manifestations; confessing choices made that do not please him; confiding in him the most intimate aspects of one's soul and experience; asking him to reveal the truth in every significant matter; asking him to meet the needs of others; asking him to meet one's own needs; treating others in the same way that one would wish to be treated; and acting upon the directives which God implants in one's conscience after one has honestly and humbly sought God with all his heart.

God, being just, will in some way reward those who choose to please him and will in some way punish those who choose to displease him.

God, being merciful, will in some way temper his justice for those who acknowledge wrong choices and who choose to make God's pleasure their ongoing aim.

God has created man with an immortal soul.

God is free to direct his creation as he chooses, so supernatural events (miracles) are possible.

Just as the universe had a beginning in time, so it will have an end in time.

I wanted to make a difference in the world, so that summer I packed up and began the process of moving into an inner-city boarding house in Charlotte. I wanted to show love to the down-and-outers who lived there. For reasons that still aren't clear to me, I backed out of the deal and moved in with my parents for the rest of the summer.

At one point I shared some of my struggles with my father, who had himself experienced a couple crises of faith as a young man. He listened to my reasons for doubting but chastised me for my disrespect for God's word. I was somewhat hurt by his response at

the time, but I understood where he was coming from and did not harbor ill will against him. I did not relish the inner turmoil I was experiencing, and I truly did want to believe, so I wrote to the seminary I had applied to and explained my situation. When they at last responded a couple weeks before the start of the school year, they invited me to attend despite my doubts.

Accepting the invitation of the seminary, I found myself a skeptic among a sea of believers. The atmosphere was electric--filled with people who loved God with a passion and degree of sincerity I had rarely witnessed elsewhere. About three months into my seminary studies, after having talked with some understanding professors and friends and having read the heavy-handed nineteenth-century apologetic work *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* by John Haley, my confidence in the reliability of the Bible was restored.

Because Old Testament ethics had contributed significantly to my doubts, I elected to write a paper entitled "The Morality of the Old Testament God" as part of a Christian apologetics class. Following are its concluding paragraphs:

Integrity mandates the admission that God's reference to slaves as property poses not a little difficulty. And so it goes for the seeming lesser value attributed to females than to males in Leviticus 27:1-8. Some of the wartime acts of the Israelites carried out with God's sanction stir the soul to revulsion. Not all questions lend themselves to answers that can be detailed in an undertaking of this proportion, and some may not lend themselves to satisfactory solutions in any treatise on the subject. Yet it is not the nature of the transcendent, sovereign God to reveal every matter to finite minds:

Let a man solve the grand problem of the ages; let him tell us why an infinitely wise, powerful, and benevolent Creator allowed evil to enter at all his universe--let him explain this contradiction, and we may safely engage to explain those which occur in the Bible. For none of them--not all together--are so dark, unfathomable, and appalling as this one grand, ultimate Discrepancy (Haley, 34).

Yes, let a man devise a worldview that eliminates every difficulty, answers every question, and empties life of every challenge. Such a man ceases to bear any relation to the world of all human experience. Rather, let a man diligently and humbly seek to adopt that system which offers the most coherent framework for reconciling the greatest number of conflicts and which provides the greatest unity among the disciplines of science, history, theology, and reason. Then let him not allow that framework to fall on account of a limited selection of mysteries which remain unsolved.

Here is my brief account of that doubting experience from my perspective as a believer two years later:

First I had to understand that neither life nor the Bible always lends itself to complete understanding by the human mind. God provides for us a firm enough basis to believe with our minds and desires our trust in the remaining matters of faith that are not self-

evident. I believe God has made Himself more real to me through that testing, and I look forward to the ways He will use me because of it.

## 2.4 Marriage and missions

Following my year of seminary, I moved back to my parents' house in Waxhaw, NC, near Charlotte. It was there that I met my beautiful wife Charlene Newton. The day I met her (June 30, 1991), I was impressed enough to think of her as my future wife, and I immediately wrote the following to a friend from seminary:

Life around here has been a little slow lately, but I trust that it's going to pick up soon. I've been trying different churches in the area, but I was getting weary of church hopping, so I decided yesterday that I would come back to Waxhaw Bible Church [where my parents attended] for at least a while. I recall mowing the lawn yesterday and praying flippantly that I would meet my wife at church today. (I had never uttered such a prayer before.) There was a new girl in Sunday School, but I was hardly impressed, so I lost faith in what I believed to be a silly and ineffectual prayer. So I had forgotten about that prayer when after the church service I met the son and daughter of two Wycliffe missionaries who had recently come back from the field. The daughter's name is Charlene Newton. My heart was seized. The beauty, the majesty! The epitome of RBinity [RB=Righteous Babe], right before my eyes! And her brother! A perfect mediator! He's as near my age as anyone there, and it seems that he'll turn out to be a good friend, something that has been missing from my experience at Waxhaw Bible Church to this point.

Anyway, I am prematurely publishing my reactions to a breathtaking experience, and perhaps I will once again subject my emotions to the rule of reason. Maybe it's all a coincidence, and maybe I am reacting this way since I have been deprived of contact with eligible females since I left Columbia. But it was good to observe her, to get to know her brother, and to talk some with her as well. She recently received her degree in intercultural studies at Biola, and she's planning on going into mission work, perhaps Bible translation, but she hasn't fully decided yet.

We began a wonderful romance, helped by the Sunday School superintendent who asked us to teach the junior high Sunday School class together. As the economy was in recession, however, I was unable to find a local programming job and ended up accepting a position in northern Minnesota just four months after I met Charlene. Having maintained a long-distance relationship, I proposed to her during my Christmas visit to North Carolina. We married in June 1992 and lived in Minnesota for a year together before joining Wycliffe Bible Translators. We look back at our time in Minnesota with fond memories of our friends and the Bible Church we attended. I taught the high school Sunday School class, and Charlene and I together helped with junior high AWANA, a Bible memory program for children.

Our next-door neighbor, a co-worker at the 3,000-employee company where I worked (in a town of 1,700!), was the only avowed atheist with whom I have conversed, even up

until now. My immediate reaction when he told me of his atheism was to say, "You mean you believe in *evolution*?" From my perspective, the idea of slime-to-man evolution was more preposterous than any idea that could be imagined. I could not understand how my friend could wear his badge of evolution and materialistic philosophy so proudly. The night before our departure, I stayed up talking with him until four in the morning, patiently trying to persuade him that, even if evolution were possible, it could not account for the origin of matter and natural laws. We parted ways respectfully, neither of us having been swayed, but I do recall thinking that atheism could indeed solve a number of difficult questions about the nature of reality, if it weren't for the fact that atheism was simply impossible.

The following years involved in retrospect an almost insane flurry of activity. We've now been married nearly eleven years, and the longest we've lived in one house is 18 months. When we last counted in 1999, we had lived in 18 places for one month or longer in six different countries.

On the basis of Paul's theology, we believed that those who die without hearing and responding to the gospel are liable to eternal condemnation:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14-15)

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known... (Romans 15:20).

Taking Paul's example, we joined Wycliffe Bible Translators and chose to minister among the Butu people of Cantor<sup>iii</sup>[3] on the edge of the Sahara desert. There were no known Christian believers in this tribe of 500,000 souls, and we felt that by reaching them, we would be helping to speed the day of Christ's return, a day when there would be "...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

Before setting foot among the Butu, however, we were required to take graduate linguistic courses at the University of North Dakota and at a linguistic institute affiliated with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Dallas. Funding for our studies and future ministry required that we raise regular financial support commitments from churches and friends. This involved much travel in the US and Canada, including two trips of over 10,000 miles each. During the first major trip in 1994, Charlene was quite sick with her first pregnancy, and during the second trip while on furlough in 1999, we had two pre-schoolers and Charlene was again sick with her third pregnancy. At one point, while passing through New Mexico, she had to make a hospital emergency room visit due to dehydration.

Our first stop outside the US was Belgium, where we studied French for a year (1995-96), since the official language of Cantor is French (though only 10% of the populace speak it). Pregnancy interrupted our plans to go to Africa, so we spent two months at a linguistic school in France, where our second son was born. From there we went to a beautiful Bible school in Switzerland to continue practicing our French for three months before moving on to a three-month orientation to African living in the country of Cameroon. The highlight of our time there was our three-week stay in the village home of a Cameroonian family, with our two diaper-toting boys. (Space precludes mention of a great many interesting details in all these travels, but you can imagine how it might have been for us.)

In 1997 we finally arrived in Troune, Cantor, one of the hottest capital cities in the world. Before moving to the Butu area, we were required to spend a year in the capital doing "group service," which for me involved computer support for the 30+ Wycliffe missionaries in the country. We did make a one-month trip to the Butu area, a three-day, 900-mile trip away. It was during that trip that Charlene began her third pregnancy. Morning sickness and a five-hour delay due to sand on the road etched the return trip forever in our memories. Because of the pregnancy and because my mother was in the final stages of her sixteen-year battle with cancer, we decided to cut short our four-year overseas term by one year and returned to the US for furlough in 1998. My mother passed away at the age of 63 while we were en route. The pain of her loss was tempered by the knowledge that her suffering was over and that she was in the presence of her Creator. I do not recall being angry at God, nor did I question his sovereignty at that point.

## 2.5 Crisis #3

For most of our yearlong furlough, we pursued further linguistic training in North Dakota and Dallas. From the time of my 1991 crisis, I had managed to avoid serious doubt and remained confident of the truth of the gospel. However, my faith was again tested in the spring of 1999 during a linguistic course taught by a member of Wycliffe Bible Translators. One assignment was to read George Lakoff's *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, primarily a treatise on linguistic categories. Somewhat tangentially, Lakoff mentioned so-called "ring species" as an example of the difficulty of making objective linguistic references to reality. One of many instances is a "species" of salamander that surrounds the California Central Valley. Traditionally, a species is defined as a population that can interbreed and produce healthy, fertile offspring. But in the case of this salamander, say there are 10 varieties surrounding the valley. Variety one can interbreed with neighboring variety two, and two with three, and so forth, but where the circle is completed with variety one adjacent to variety ten, the two cannot interbreed. This reminded me precisely of a problem that Bible translators face when attempting to determine what constitutes a language. In a prior language survey class, I had learned of dialect chains where speakers of dialect A could understand speakers of neighboring dialect B; dialect B was mutually intelligible with dialect C; C with D; and so forth to F; but speakers of A could not understand speakers of F. So how many languages are there, and which dialect should be the target of a new Bible translation? I had no trouble

believing that language dialects evolved from a parent stock, so it seemed that something comparable was happening in biological species, which disturbed my notion of the fixity of species. I realize that most creationists accept limited evolution even outside the species level, but for some reason at this particular time I was shaken by the parallels between linguistic and biological evolution, to the point that I began to suspect evolution might be true.

For about a month I doubted the very existence of God. I recall attending a triumphal Easter service while weeping inside at my inability to connect with the enthusiasm of the believers surrounding me. Wishing to resolve my doubts, I wrote a letter explaining my thoughts to the professor of my class. When I subsequently met with him, he helped me see that a number of my difficulties stemmed from an overly rigid conception of inerrancy and a limited human view of God's purposes. One rhetorical question he posed stuck with me and helped me see the narrowness of my thinking: "Why is it that just Westerners doubt God's existence?" Quite quickly my doubts were put to rest.

Just three months later we were back for our second term in Cantor. In July 1999 we moved to our allocation in Nardon, a town of about 10,000 on the edge of the Sahara. We had three children in cloth diapers at the same time, and no running water during the day, but our closest colleagues with six children, not to mention the hardships of the Cantorian people, helped keep our situation in perspective. One of our most persistent challenges was to discern who was truly in need and how to meet those needs.

Our initial task in Nardon was to learn Butuma, the language of the Butu people. Though some previous linguistic work had been done in the language, there was no standardized writing system. During the year we were involved in the Butuma project, we hired a language associate to help us learn some of the basics of the language. We used French as a common language to discuss Butuma and elicit recordings. It was satisfying to play a role, along with several Butuma speakers and another missionary, in the writing of a proposal for an orthography (standard writing system) for Butuma.

While in Nardon, there was plenty of time to read in the evenings. It was a great encouragement to read *Darwin's Black Box* by biochemist Michael Behe, who offered extraordinary and seemingly undeniable proof of the irreducible complexity of nature's wonders at the microscopic level. Any lingering doubts about God's role in creation were swept away. This portion of prayer from 23 January 2000 captures my mood at the time:

Father God, thank you for continuing to reveal yourself to me and for reaffirming my confidence that you indeed designed all of creation. How could I ever have doubted a year ago that you existed? What got into me? How did I presume to account for the existence of matter and all the interacting physical laws without recourse to Someone outside of matter, time and the physical laws? Given that I can be assured of your existence and interest in my life, why do I ever go through a day without giving you my best, without praising you with all my soul, without confiding in you all my dreams and fears, without invoking your aid on behalf of family, friends, and those who are serving you around the world?

## 2.6 Crisis #4: Return from the mission field

In March 2000 we traveled to the neighboring country of Bandazu to attend a phonology workshop. It was during our month there that my doubts again came to a head, setting in motion our return from the mission field. Charlene and I had decided in January to read through a chronological one-year Bible. As I read through the Pentateuch, I began recalling all the reasons for my earlier doubts. Again, many of my concerns were related to ethics, though I also noted what seemed to be pagan understandings of God and culturally conditioned modes of worship, as well as a few anachronisms that pointed to post-Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

Often when I had been tempted to doubt earlier, I would remind myself of the many fulfilled prophecies of the Bible outlined by Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and others. But I was confused as to why on the one hand the Old Testament seemed so ugly while at the same time it seemed to have amazing predictive ability. The prophecy of the 70 weeks of Daniel particularly impressed me because of its accuracy in predicting the time of Messiah's coming. I figured if these prophecies could be called into question, there would be little reason left for assuming that the Bible is a divinely inspired document. I found arguments on both sides of the issue on the Internet, but the skeptical explanations seemed more plausible.

Not wanting to give up my faith that had been so dear to me for so long, I searched the Internet for some good apologetic articles. I had heard that Clark Pinnock was an apologist of a more scholarly caliber than Josh McDowell, so I searched for his name. Instead of finding something written by him, I found the online book *Beyond Born Again<sup>iv</sup>[4]* by Robert M. Price in which Clark Pinnock is mentioned. Robert Price grew up as a fundamentalist, became an evangelical, went to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, became a liberal Christian because of inconsistencies he saw in the Bible and in the evangelical faith, then went on to earn two PhDs at Drew University Theological Seminary. He was still a liberal Christian when he wrote this book, but I learned later to my disappointment that he had become an agnostic after some 20 years as a liberal Christian. In any case, his was the first book I had read specifically attacking evangelicalism, and it was compelling. Not that all his arguments were watertight, but enough of them were convincing to me to throw my faith into a tailspin. I don't believe I would have been willing to listen to anything he had to say had it not been for my prior "smelling a rat" in reading the Old Testament. Having devoted my life to become a Bible translator, it was devastating to realize that the Bible probably was not God's word after all. You can only imagine the knot in my stomach and the beating of my heart with every new discovery I made confirming my suspicions that the Bible was man-made from start to finish.

Following is a prayer from April 7, 2000, shortly after our return to the mission center in Troune, Cantor:

Father God, God of all creation, the one who made me, the one who loves me more than anyone else, the one who desires my well-being, I come to you today with a very heavy

heart. Or more precisely, a knot in my stomach. Once again, it appears to me that all I have been taught about the inspiration of the Bible is false. Deep down inside me, I have a very, very strong suspicion that the Bible is human and not divine through and through. You know the passages I struggle with. I can't seem to reconcile my conception of your nature with the way your character is portrayed in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. Where do I get this sense of moral injustice when I read about how a master is not to be punished for beating his slave as long as the slave doesn't die, because the slave is his property? There seems to be within me a moral law that stands in judgment of the Bible. Is this internal moral law a product of my culture that is to be submitted to the higher moral law of the Bible, or vice versa? Why does the Old Testament incessantly violate my idea of right and wrong? Why does it regard women in such a poor light? Why are the people of Yahweh supposed to wipe out men, women and children but are allowed to take the virgins for themselves? Why are the sacrifices offered in the tabernacle called food for Yahweh? Why does Yahweh need sacrifices anyway? Can't he simply forgive those who ask for his forgiveness, just as we humans forgive each other? Why do some people get zapped instantly for touching the ark inadvertently while Aaron, Moses' brother, gets off scot free after making a golden calf for the people to worship, and then he becomes the leader of the priesthood and the recipient of the best of all the offerings of the people? Why do women suspected of adultery have to go through some bizarre ordeal of drinking bitter water and seeing their womb swell and thigh waste away, while no provision is made for women to test their husbands for the same offense? God, the weight of all these troublesome passages, and many more, add up in my mind to foolishness. Or at least an attribution of ancient cultural ideas on the God of all creation. The list goes on: the Bible's endorsement of polygamy, the magic of the striped sticks causing sheep's offspring to be striped, the assertion that camels don't have split hoofs, the mixed use of round numbers and exact numbers in Numbers to justify paying redemption money to Aaron's family, Yahweh's command to hamstring the horses, the barbaric brutality of the Israelites in their holy war, the contradictory teachings on divorce, the many little historical contradictions, the attempt to explain language diversification through a "how-the-leopard-got-its-spots" Tower of Babel story, the conception of a young earth which is clearly unattested to by the facts, the fact that Christians have been unable to agree on so many doctrines while reading the same Bible that seems to say one thing in one place and another in another place, the long process of canonizing the Bible, the vengeful attitudes ascribed to Yahweh when his wayward people are attacked by their enemies, the sacrifices in Ezekiel's temple that has yet to be built, the vengeance Samson took on his betrayers under the influence of the Spirit of the Yahweh, the exclusively physical punishments and rewards promised for the Israelites with no mention of heaven until late in the writing of the Old Testament, and on and on and on.

How much of this am I expected to absorb and put into the filing cabinet labeled "troublesome, contradictory or unjust but accept it by faith anyway"? How much tension can a soul take? Why does it seem like I'm just about the only one in my circle of friends that struggles with these issues as deeply as I do? Am I warped, proud, or rebellious? Are you blinding my eyes because I haven't spent enough time with you in prayer lately? Or are the things I'm beginning to suspect--that the Bible is not divinely inspired--true after

all? This is not just an academic exercise. The direction of the rest of my life, if not eternity, depends on it. I know that even if the Bible is true, you don't mind my bringing these questions before you, since the Psalms record similarly piercing doubts that David experienced. Father God, take me in your arms just as I would take David or Philip or Corinne [our children] in my arms in a time of trouble, and comfort me with words of assurance and love and healing. I know you are my creator. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you made me and love me. I ask you to have compassion on me and lead me to the truth. I ask you to search me heart and reveal to me anything that displeases you and that stands in the way of my finding the truth about the Bible. Open up my eyes so I can see my sin as you see it, and give me the courage and strength to put it away. I confess that I have been detached from you and my family and friends. I have been living in a world of my own mind, excluding those who are dearest to me. I have been objecting to the inequality of men and women expressed in the Bible, yet I've effectively been reinforcing it in my own marriage by leaving Charlene to do all the household work. Forgive me, I pray, and help me to get back on the right footing. Father, if I could only sit before you and talk with you as a man talks with another man, if only I could ask you what you had in mind when you made humanity and allowed so many different religions to take root and lead to so many confusing, contradictory and sometimes harmful paths. Why are people so gullible to believe so many contradictory things? Muslims believe what they do because they've been exposed to Islamic teachings and social influences, and it seems no different from why Christians are Christians. If no one major religion is the truth, then what is? Do I have to make up a minor religion to get at the truth? Heaven forbid! In my opinion there are already too many religions. Oh, Father, I don't want to be impertinent. I don't want to reject Jesus as the Son of God if he really is the Son of God or equivalent to God. But if he isn't the Son of God, then I don't want to spend my life in Africa proclaiming he is. What do I do, Lord, what do I do? Comfort my soul, Father. Thank you. Thank you for coming over me with your presence and that indescribable peace that assures me of your care for me. You have answered my prayer to take me in your arms and comfort me. I love you, I love you, I love you.

Thank you for my loving wife with whom I can discuss freely so many things. Thank you, thank you, thank you that I didn't marry [my former girlfriend]. There's no way I could have discussed any of this with her without being stonewalled. I believe you truly did bring us together, that you meant for me to have her and vice versa. Thank you for our three precious little children. How they bring joy to my life! You are truly an incredible genius to have conceived of the idea of babies and little children. Thank you for keeping them alive and in relatively good health to this point. Even if you decide someday to take them away, I pray that I would be able to join with Job in saying, "The Lord gives and takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." I pray for Philip, asking that I would have the wisdom to treat him in a way that will encourage his development and positive attitudes. May he not feel alienated from his parents. Keep us from inappropriate anger toward him, and help us to discipline him in the most effective way, not only to bring about short-term compliance but especially to nurture long-term respect, obedience and love. Thank you that David has a soft heart and that he desires to do what is right. May we always encourage that. On the other hand, I pray that he would not take his sensitivity too far, crying or pouting when he's hurt. Thank you for the spunkiness of

Corinne and for the great fun she is at this stage in her life. Help us to train her correctly from the beginning and not to allow bad habits to develop in her or in our way of dealing with her. May each of them grow up to love and respect us and to follow you with all their heart. I love, you Father, even though I'm confused. If my unbelief is unsubstantiated, help me in my unbelief, and may I be convinced that the Bible is indeed your word. If my unbelief is merited, I pray you'll help me know how to proceed from here. In either case, I pray you'll take away the blinders from my eyes that stem from myself, my sin, my culture, my religion or Satan, whatever the case may be. It seems that there are very few who manage to rise above the beliefs of their own culture. It's usually the intellectuals. I have a hard time believing that you would set things up in such a way that only intellectuals find the truth. But I see how grotesque the fruits of anti-intellectualism have been in so many societies, and I don't want to have part in that either. How do I find truth, Father? I pray as I come to you in prayer during this special time of seeking that you will reveal yourself to me in such a way that I can be assured of the truth. I certainly can't find it out on my own or exclusively through intellectual evaluation. I want to seek truth in the way that you want me to go about it, whether it means accepting the Bible by faith, reading philosophy, praying until you reveal yourself to me, going to seminary, meditating, reflecting, talking with others, or any combination of the above. My problem is that I really don't know how to go about it. I need your hand to guide me.

At this point I contacted an old friend from seminary who was also working in Cantor. He was understanding and reasonable and was able to help somewhat by reading Robert Price and pointing out some inconsistencies. He did not take the same approach as some other well-meaning evangelicals with whom I shared my struggles. Many reminded me we were in a spiritual battle and the enemy was trying to get the best of me because he didn't want me translating the Scriptures for an unreached people. (I grant that this is probably the case if the Bible really is true, but not so if it is not.) Others said that my disbelief was due to some sin in my life. Still others suggested it didn't matter how many logical arguments could be brought to bear against the Bible; I just needed to accept it by faith. Another took the arguments seriously but interpreted the Bible in such a literal way (young earth, head coverings for women, rigid submission of women to men, etc.) as to make it hard for me to listen to much else of what he said. I appreciate my friend from seminary for being a friend and honestly helping me confront some of the arguments without judging me. I considered that if I were ever to come back to the faith, it would be through his kind of approach.

Life had been very busy for us with a lot of moving around (I think we've done more than our share!) and I had not been especially consistent in daily setting aside time alone for prayer for some time. I suppose it could be argued that my struggle was a result of this lapse (though the first time I had doubts 12 years earlier was during a period in which my devotional life was very consistent and meaningful). I talked to our Cantor mission director about my problems and requested permission for a two-week vacation, during which time I prayed and read intensively, seeking God and worshipping him more earnestly than I had done in months. I found in the mission library Helmut Thielicke's *How the World Began*, a series of sermons preached on the book of Genesis. Here was a

German scholar of the first order, who, though not perhaps an evangelical by the American definition (and certainly not a young-earth creationist or inerrantist), believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who bodily rose from the dead. Somehow I had lost sight of the fact that there really are serious scholars who believe the essential message of the Bible. I also perused Arie Noordzij's commentary on Leviticus and Numbers. Though an evangelical, he recognized many of the problems I had noticed in the Pentateuch without facetiously brushing them aside. I appreciated his forthrightness in contrast to those who glibly offer strained harmonizations of difficult problems. A notorious example of this is the explanation that the cock crowed after Peter's denial not once, not twice, not thrice but six times!

In reflecting on Thieliicke's book during a prayer time one morning, I broke down and confessed my unbelief in Jesus as God's son, and I felt a warm presence that convinced me I was back onto the right track. I was still not persuaded that the Bible was without discrepancies, but soon I happened on the idea that, just as God creates handicapped people with defects or blemishes (Lev. 26:16) that I would hesitate to call errors, so the Bible could contain "blemishes" that I would not call errors. This allowed me to consider myself a Biblical inerrantist in conformity with the Wycliffe doctrinal standard while still honestly owning up to the fact that it contains discrepancies. This breakthrough occurred in Troune in April, about a month after reading Robert Price.

We were now free to go back to our allocation to continue language learning. Meanwhile, I had ordered from Amazon.com a number of books on these matters, both pro and con, and they were waiting for me upon our return to Nardon. Titles included Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, Thomas Morris' *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, Kelly James Clark's *When Faith is not Enough*, C. Stephen Evans' *Philosophy of Religion*, Donald Bloesch's *Holy Scripture*, Larry Richards' *735 Baffling Bible Questions Answered*, Helmut Thieliicke's *The Evangelical Faith*, Waldemar Janzen's *Old Testament Ethics*, John Barton's *Ethics and the Old Testament*, Willard Swartley's *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women*, and Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg's *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*. Though I am a slow reader, I spent every moment I could spare devouring these books, feeling an insatiable hunger to know the truth. It was particularly *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* that plunged me back into a state of doubt from which I could see little hope of escape.

Prayer from June 15, 2000, Nardon, Cantor:

Father God, Creator of all things, lover of my soul, have mercy on me, a sinner. How I learn more and more each day of my inadequacy to discern truth by myself. I don't know whether it's because of pride or because for some other reason you've chosen not to reveal yourself to me, at least to the extent I would like. All I know is that I do not have full assurance of the truth, and I submit myself before you now, asking that you will somehow reveal the truth to me and give me confidence that it is indeed the truth. The Bible seems so conditioned by the ideas of the times in which it was written and to me bears no evidence of divine authorship. Must I be eternally damned because I can't believe that Samson, under the influence of your Spirit, avenged himself on his personal

enemies by killing 1000 of them with the jawbone of a donkey? Or because I see inconsistencies in the accounts and viewpoints of the biblical authors, such as whether Jehu was justified in killing the household of Ahab (Kings) or not (Hosea). Or because I see many of the ethics of the Bible (e.g., polygamy, taking virgins as war captives and slaughtering the rest, slavery, etc.) as objectionable? Or because I see innumerable parallels between the myths of the Ancient Near East and those of the Bible, leading me to believe that they are in fact mere myths? Or that I can't see why you couldn't just forgive truly penitent people for their sins without requiring a blood sacrifice, just as humans forgive each other? Or that I can't see any fundamental reason to accept Christianity over Islam except for Evangelical Christianity's emphasis on a personal relationship with you (but there are sects within Islam and other religions that do emphasize such a relationship)? In short, it seems quite clear to me that Christianity is just another religion like the others, perhaps a little more advanced than others, but a human creation nonetheless. Would it be wrong for me to seek the illumination of your Spirit and ask you to reveal to me the essentials of belief and practice so that I can live a life that pleases you? If that should entail leading me back to the Christian faith, then so be it! In fact, I would love to remain a part of the fold. But at this point it all seems so misguided. If I am being led to the truth in leaving Christianity and accepting a simple theism, then it cannot certainly be because I am a person who is more pleasing in your sight than all other Christians who failed to grasp the insights you've given me. That would certainly be delusional. I am a selfish, lazy, proud and unloving person who finds it hard to improve. Perhaps it is precisely because of these faults and sins of mine that I am being prevented from seeing the truth of Christianity. But why am I so rare among Christians? Very few seem to struggle with their faith to the extent that I do, and yet it doesn't seem (though I could be deluded) that I am among the most sinful of Christians, if there even exists a scale of sinfulness among believers. Perhaps you see my pride as more evil than the adultery of Christians who seem to have no trouble believing despite their ongoing sin. Perhaps it's as a result of this pride that you are deliberately giving me over to doubts that to me seem well founded, but which would not be so if I were given the enlightening of the Holy Spirit. If so, then it is my pride that needs to be dealt with. God of all creation, who has the power to call the worlds into existence, I entreat you to use your power to excise my pride and to reveal to me my utter dependence on you. I cannot plumb the depths of the motivations, desires and interests of my soul. It's so easy to deceive myself. Reveal to me where I err and spur me on to repentance and good deeds and right belief. Father, I do know two commandments that I have no inclination to question: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. And I can agree with Micah, who enjoins us to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Perhaps my job description at the moment should be to implement these in my own life, rather than trying to determine metaphysical truth through an intellectual pursuit. It is only those who obey who can believe, and those who believe obey. Help me to obey the light you have given me and to wait on you to reveal the truth to me. You have showered my life with such privilege and opportunity, and I have been so miserly with it, keeping most of it to myself. I am not an island; there are people around me with needs, even my own wife. May I not spend my time selfishly but seek to love, to pour out myself, to get up and do what I should do, even when I'd rather remain bed. I have to face it, Lord: I'm lazy. Continue to reveal that

to me until I've dealt with it sufficiently in my life. I love you and am hopeful you'll lead me where you want me to go.

There was no way I could continue in the ministry of Bible translation with these persistent doubts, so I contacted our mission director in Troune, and he suggested returning to the US for counseling. We returned to Troune, and while waiting for our airline tickets, I spent the better part of a week expressing my doubts in a 26-page document so my designated counselor would know the background of my struggles. I wrote the following on July 1 2000 in an e-mail message to many of our financial supporters and friends explaining our situation:

Dear Friends,

Most of you have received our April newsletter in which we mentioned that it was a difficult one to write. Unfortunately, this one is even more difficult. Though for a few weeks I had dealt with my doubts so that I could believe the Bible again after questioning its inspiration, I find myself doubting the Bible now more than ever. I cannot begin to communicate the inward struggle I feel. But we are encouraged by the many of you who have written saying you are praying for us. And I am comforted in my prayer times by God's presence. My greatest prayer is that He will lead me to the truth and to a life that pleases Him.

Two weeks ago in Nardon we decided we could not continue business as usual. Everyone we contacted agreed it would be best to return to Dallas for counseling with a seasoned, well-respected leader in Wycliffe. [...] During this past week I have written a 25-page document explaining my doubts in order to provide points of discussion in my counseling sessions. If you are interested in reading the document and offering feedback, I would be glad to send it to you in Word 6 format. (Keep in mind that it does not reflect Wycliffe doctrine, just my musings as a troubled seeker.)

[...]

Our future is uncertain to us at the moment. We have not sold our belongings and hope to come back in a few months if my doubts can be resolved. Charlene is taking it as well as can be expected, though of course it is not easy for her. Our marriage remains strong. We continue to depend on your prayers.

We welcome your feedback, but do not be concerned if we do not respond to you until after we've settled in Dallas. It's a busy, difficult time.

With heavy hearts,

Ken (& Charlene) Daniels

Over thirty individuals requested to read my document, entitled "Why I doubt the Bible." I have included it here in Appendix A for those who are interested in understanding the issues that led me at that time to leave the mission field. I do not presently stand by all my assertions--my perspective has evolved significantly since then--but the document does capture many of the important reasons why I no longer consider myself a Christian. At the time I wrote the document, I did not doubt God's existence but felt that he had simply not revealed himself through any particular religion. "Simple theist" is the label I would have given myself.

The responses to my announcement and the document were mixed. A number of people assured us of their understanding and prayers, as in the following message:

Dear Ken (and Char,)

I am responding to your letter. First of all, let me say that I am so grateful for your honesty and your willingness to express how you truly feel. It gives me confidence and hope for us all if there are those among us who are willing to face the truth about ourselves squarely and then let God move. After we rec'd word about your struggles in this area, I was profoundly touched and was praying and after I prayed, I looked in the Bible and believe God led me to a verse that I want to share with you.

Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time. Daniel 11:35

I remember a similar struggle I had about the Holy Spirit and how we actually are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. It was a horrendous time, but God brought me through that valley teaching me more about myself than answering my questions. This being his method with Job as well. We are praying for you and are confident that it is a very good thing that you are going through and are pulling for you not to despair, but know that He is big enough to resolve all doubts and loving enough to do it. I hope that your counselor is a good one and not going to try to argue you into faith. But we will pray that God leads in all this even to whom you speak and how those conversations go.

Others, like the following correspondent, took more of a hard-line approach<sup>[5]</sup>:

Just one overall comment before I make individual comments, page by page. As I started out, I thought I would be able to comment on specific points fairly adequately. As I got further on and especially near the end, I grew more and more frustrated. At the end I didn't know whether you needed more love and sympathy and patience and a 'handle with care' approach, or whether you needed a good kick in the pants!

Cyrus Gordon: Just what kind of outstanding evangelical was he? What was his theological outlook and his set of biases?

p.19 end: HUH? Are YOU telling God what he can and cannot say thru his prophets? Really, just who do you think you are, telling God how to run his business? [As you can tell, by now I am getting frustrated.]

p.21 Price: and just who is this guy, writing not in any formal publication? And what are his biases? Man, in this day and age, if you are looking for any sort of trash of any kind to feed your mind, you'll find it on the internet. I don't determine my theology by looking at the internet. This has become absolutely ridiculous. Frankly, Ken, at this point you don't deserve loving help if this is where you are going to go to determine your outlook on Scripture. I mean it.

So I say here, all right, if you want to sit in judgment on Scripture and listen to all the critics uncritically, instead of letting the record and its defenders speak, go ahead and do so, at your eternal risk. But I ask, is this a wise course? Again, read Proverbs 1-7.

See Appendix B for my response to another rebuttal to my document.

## **2.7 A brief recovery of faith**

After returning to Dallas, I began meeting with my designated counselor. He was wise, charitable, gentle and willing to listen. He admitted he did not have answers to all my concerns. Though I was ready to leave the mission, Wycliffe decided to grant me a three-month probationary period during which I was to limit myself to the reading of only Christian books. I at first chafed at the thought, but realized it would not be prudent to give up so quickly seven years of training and service with the mission, so I agreed to the conditions. During the following three months I read a number of apologetics books by authors like C. S. Lewis, Lee Strobel and Greg Boyd. By two months into this period, I felt my faith had been substantially restored, and wrote the following to our supporters on September 11, 2000:

Dear Friends,

Thanks so much for your continued messages of encouragement and for your prayers. I've answered a number of your messages but am still working on the rest. Your prayers have indeed been effective as I have traveled through the long, dark tunnel of deep doubt. Though many questions remain, I made the decision about three weeks ago to continue in the faith. I am thankful to God for his grace in restoring my confidence in the reasonableness of the Christian faith and in assuring me personally that it is true. The book that helped the most was *Letters from a Skeptic* by Greg Boyd, who exchanged letters for 3 years with his 70-year-old agnostic father before his father finally believed. I would recommend it highly to anyone going through struggles like mine. His emphasis was on the historical reliability of the gospel record, focusing on the core of Christianity (i.e., Christ). It is Christ who is the center of our faith, and the difficulties of the rest of the Bible are peripheral matters that can be dealt with (or held in suspension) after the central question of faith in Christ is resolved. I've also rediscovered the warmth and

genius of C.S. Lewis (*God in the Dock, Surprised by Joy, Mere Christianity*) and am humbled by the depth of his knowledge and insight. I particularly appreciate his approach to the similarities of Ancient Near East myth and the stories in the Bible. He has a way of turning difficulties into an apologetic for the faith.

This journey I've been on is aptly summed up by the words of Malcolm Muggeridge (British BBC Journalist) on the back cover of his book *Rediscovering Jesus*:

I have always loved Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, perhaps because its hero remains on the move up to the very end. Even when he is crossing that last river, with Mount Sion actually in sight, he is still assailed by doubts and troubled by the hazards of his journey. I, too, have found no finality in the quest for a sure faith, and do not expect, or even hope to. At the same time, I dare to say that as I have plodded on the light has shone a little more brightly and steadily for me. To make this light shine before men, as Christ exhorted us, has always seemed to me the highest that any communicator can hope to achieve--even if it amounts to no more than, as it were, striking a match in a dark immense cavern, which flares up and then flickers out. Such, at any rate, is the purpose of these writings, undertaken with no expert knowledge, no sudden Damascus Road illumination; representing no more than the efforts of a typical twentieth century sceptical mind and sensual disposition to grapple with the circumstances of his life and times.

Many of you expressed that my struggles are part of a spiritual battle.

While I do not understand much about what happens behind the scenes, nor do I have an interest in speculating, I do agree that my mind has been a spiritual battleground.

...

We plan to meet again with Wycliffe administration in late October to determine our next step. Our desire is to return to Cantor, though not before my renewed faith has stood the test of a few months' more time. We also depend on the ongoing input of Wycliffe and our supporters and friends in making this decision. The earliest we might return is January 2001.

## **2.8 Evolution**

During this probationary period I happened upon a website by Glenn Morton, a former young-earth creationist. He had ghostwritten a chapter in defense of creationism for Josh McDowell's apologetic book *Reasons Skeptics Should Consider Christianity* and had contributed a number of articles to the *Creation Research Society Quarterly*. As an oil-exploring geophysicist, however, his findings in the field over time did not square with the young-earth creationist views he espoused, and he eventually became a theistic evolutionist. Though driven to the brink of atheism, he discovered a way to reconcile naturalistic, unguided evolution with the Genesis account of creation, and was able to retain his belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. In reading his reasons for espousing evolution, I became convinced--unhappily at first--that the evidence was strongly in favor

of common descent, and that I could not with integrity simply choose to disregard it. His attempt to reconcile evolution with Genesis seemed a little strained, but I felt it opened up the possibility for me to believe both in evolution and the Bible. I read more on the subject by other Christian authors, notably *Finding Darwin's God* by Kenneth Miller, a Catholic cell biologist. I moved from seeing evolution as absurd to acknowledging there was no other way to explain the data.

Though the truth of an idea is not established by the number of people who hold to it, the fact that the vast majority of earth and life scientists accept evolution should cause creationists to consider the basis for their opposition to it. I had earlier rejected evolution because I thought I was sufficiently qualified to dismiss it as ludicrous, much in the way medieval commoners and theologians felt qualified to judge the absurd notion that the earth is spinning on its axis at the rate of 1,000 miles per hour while hurtling around the sun at an even greater rate. I have read a good deal of creationist literature, and am convinced that most of the authors had already made up their minds before beginning to investigate the matter. Once committed to the cause of creation, they are predisposed to select and interpret the evidence in favor of their position, some going on to receive advanced degrees to lend credence to their cause. My perception is that very few scientists move from evolution to creationism, but many more (e.g., Glenn Morton) are compelled by the evidence to travel the other direction, as thoroughly documented in Ronald Numbers' *The Creationists*. I am not aware of any creationists who regularly submit their findings for peer review in reputable scientific journals; they tend instead to write books directly to the majority of the populace who already reject the notion that we have descended from ape-like ancestors. I am in favor of examining both sides of any matter, but if creationists are going to be taken seriously by mainstream scientists, they will have to adjust their approach. I do not want to make myself out as being more qualified to judge the matter than the typical creationist, but I am disturbed by the flippant disregard and disdain on the part of many creationists for the patient investigation and analysis that have led most scientists in the past century to accept evolution. While a creationist, I refused to consider that maybe, just maybe, scientists knew a little more about the facts bearing on origins than I. Instead, I felt that scientists were simply blinded by their impulse to reject God or to meet with the approval of their peers. After reading the evidence for evolution presented by believing scientists, I could no longer in good conscience retain this position. I had to take seriously the words of St. Augustine in his work *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*:

Often a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other parts of the world, about the motions and orbits of the stars and even their sizes and distances, . . . and this knowledge he holds with certainty from reason and experience. It is thus offensive and disgraceful for an unbeliever to hear a Christian talk nonsense about such things, claiming that what he is saying is based in Scripture. We should do all that we can to avoid such an embarrassing situation, lest the unbeliever see only ignorance in the Christian and laugh to scorn.

This is not the place for a detailed apologetic of evolution, but I will briefly mention a bit of the evidence that changed my mind. Particularly convincing for me was an article entitled *Plagiarized Errors and Molecular Genetics* at

<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/molgen/>, which establishes common descent as firmly as any forensically solved crime. It is fairly technical but thorough. Among the extensive body of genetic evidence for common descent, one easy-to-grasp point is that all mammals, with the exception of guinea pigs and primates, are able to fabricate their own vitamin C. Guinea pigs and jungle-dwelling primates have a diet rich in vitamin C, so the loss of this capability would not have been harmful to them. Humans, too, as primates, lack this capability. That in itself would be food for thought, but even more startling is that we, along with monkeys and apes, possess an inactive gene that corresponds to the gene for vitamin C production in other mammals. To top it off, the stop codons responsible for inactivating that gene are found in the same position in the same gene for both humans and primates. This can be readily accounted for within an evolutionary framework, but is simply a puzzling curiosity from a creationist standpoint.

In the ongoing debate between creationism and evolution, there is one crucial matter that creationists seldom confront. While responding point by point to the commonly presented forest of evidence for evolution, attempting to explain away and knock down one tree at a time, they rarely stop to ask the question, "Why would God allow so many *apparent* evidences for evolution to exist in the first place? Did he plant them as a means of giving unbelievers a ready excuse for rejecting God? Is God deceitful, or is there in fact not even any *apparent* evidence for evolution?" If indeed evolution did not happen, there are countless ways God could have prevented it from even getting off the ground as a scientific theory. For instance, he could have created the universe without the appearance of great age, and evolution would simply not have had the necessary time to do its work. When astronomers witness a supernova explosion in a galaxy 9 billion light years away, this suggests at least an *appearance* of age. The point is not whether there may be some alternative explanation to defend a young universe hypothesis, but the very fact that this appearance of age exists, an appearance that God could have pre-empted in any number of ways, e.g., by making the universe smaller or the present speed of light much greater. Another showstopper for evolution would have been to make no animals at all, or at least create much greater gaps among the species, both living and extinct. If dogs were the closest animals to humans, for example, Darwin would never have been able to propose his theory. As it is, we share some 95% of our genome with chimpanzees (99.4% of our known functional genes<sup>vi</sup>[6]), and there are a number of fossil skulls intermediate in size and form between apes and humans; creationist leaders disagree over which ones are apes and which are humans. Like chimpanzees and other mammals, we have miniscule muscles that make our body hair stand on end when we're frightened or cold. For mammals with fur, this serves to make their body appear larger in order to intimidate predators or prey (cats not only stick out their fur but arch their backs), or to enhance the insulation effect of the fur when cold. But for those of us with insignificant body hair, these functions are correspondingly insignificant and suggest the *appearance* of descent from mammals in which the function was significant. Again, the point is not whether an alternative explanation can be imagined for these phenomena, but why God did not act to prevent the *appearance* of our descent from furry mammals when it was within his means to do so. Additionally, God could have nipped the idea of evolution in the bud by arranging the fossil record in any of thousands of ways other than the way it is in fact arranged, with only simple organisms at the deepest strata and more complex ones in

higher strata. Ad-hoc creationist explanations for this ordering, such as the tendency of more advanced animals to seek higher ground during Noah's flood, only highlight the problem. Even if such explanations had no other difficulties, the fact that grass and flowering plants appear only in the higher strata rules them out.

Here are a few other such questions that come to mind: Why is there the relentless struggle to survive, the diseases, parasites, vines, thorns, poison, shells, predation, camouflage, starvation, going back for eons? Why have so many species gone extinct, and why are the creatures that succeeded them similar to the ones they replaced? Why are different species and classes (e.g., marsupials) bound to particular geographical regions? Why do our genes show a seeming common history with those of the apes, including certain neutral or even harmful genes? Why do pythons have minute unused legs, why do chickens have inactivated genes for teeth, why do some whales and anteaters sprout teeth in the womb and lose them before birth, why do certain fossil whales have hind legs, why don't whales have gills, why do dolphins have all the same arm and finger bones as humans while sharks have only cartilage, why do bats have what appear to be five long webbed fingers for their wings, why can HIV adapt quickly to synthetic drugs, why can mosquitoes come to resist pesticides, why can certain microbes evolve in laboratories to eat nylon, etc.? I'm only scratching the surface. Creationists may choose to think nothing of these phenomena, or poke holes in the logic of those who present them as proofs for evolution, or find an alternative grid in which to interpret them globally, or emphasize only the unsolved puzzles of evolution, but I see a pattern suggesting the *appearance* of evolution, something which an omnipotent, undecieving God could easily have pre-empted in any number of ways if evolution indeed had not happened.

## **2.9 Resignation from the mission board**

Getting back to my story, when it came time to report to my counselor at the end of the probationary period, I was able to say that my faith had been substantially restored, but that I was somewhat troubled about the relationship between evolution and Christianity, particularly the evangelical brand of Christianity espoused by Wycliffe Bible Translators. Given that my faith had progressed, however, I expected Wycliffe at least to grant an extension to my probation or suggest a leave of absence, but instead they recommended our resignation. Charlene and I were both taken aback, but it was especially difficult for Charlene, who had grown up and served in the mission all her life. Though it hurt, I was somewhat relieved that I did not have to struggle with the decision any longer, and that I was free to resolve my remaining doubts without the pressure I had been experiencing as a member. In retrospect I believe Wycliffe's decision was appropriate, and I am grateful for it. Here is the letter we wrote to our friends and supporters in December 2000 informing them of the decision:

This is not the sort of letter we thought we would have to write at this stage in our lives, but here we are. In August we wrote of our return from Cantor due to my doubts about the Christian faith. Through counseling, praying and reading, my faith was substantially restored by the end of August, though some issues continue to trouble me.

On October 26 we met with our personnel administrator, who gently and apologetically recommended that we resign from Wycliffe Bible Translators. Though we knew it was a possibility, hearing those words was a real shock, especially for Charlene. Those in leadership feel that after having been through such a time of deep doubt, I needed a period of restoration without pressure to answer lingering questions, just as Wycliffe would recommend that new Christians not apply to Wycliffe until their faith has matured. They feel it would be best for our sakes to put some roots down in a community and a church for several years before making a decision about further service with Wycliffe.

After praying and reflecting on this recommendation, we submitted this letter:

Dear Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International:

We, Ken and Charlene Daniels, hereby submit our resignation from Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International, effective February 1, 2001. Though we are grieved over this departure, we are in full agreement with Wycliffe that this is the right decision in light of my (Ken's) recent and earlier struggles of faith.

I concur with the Wycliffe administration that, in order to arrive at and demonstrate a genuine, internal faith that stands the test of time, it is best for me to resign and thereby be free from the external pressure to conform to Wycliffe's doctrinal statement. Though I have recently regained my faith after a period of intense doubt, my long-standing tendency to waver between faith and doubt make ministry as a Wycliffe member inadvisable at this time. We will wait several years before making a decision on whether to return to Wycliffe, and then only after receiving a clear sense of God's call to do so.

The seven and a half years we have spent in Wycliffe have been both challenging and gratifying. We are at peace with all members and hold no ill will against anyone in the organization. We will greatly miss our colleagues in Cantor and around the world. Despite the pain of this decision, we believe God has used us to accomplish His purposes both in us and through us during our time as members. Please pray that He will continue to do so as we pursue life outside the organization.

In Christ,

Ken & Charlene Daniels

## **3 Life as a nonbeliever**

### **3.1 Crisis #5: Deism**

Following the October decision, I continued reading Christian literature, including the Bible and evangelical commentaries. After a couple months, however, I began again to wonder whether I was simply propping up my faith by limiting my reading to only one perspective. I reasoned that, if Christianity is true, as I believed or hoped it to be, then no

alternative truth claims could stand up to it, and the gospel would be vindicated against its competitors as I sought God in prayer. But if Christianity was not true, I wanted to know that it was not true, despite the pain that would inevitably ensue. It was not legitimate for me to determine truth on the basis of its effect on me, or on the basis of my personal desires. I simply wanted to know the truth--the Truth with a capital T--what it is that corresponds to reality, regardless of my desires or any other consideration.

It was then that I began reading *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine, a deist who championed human rights, fought slavery, and arguably more than any other individual shaped the colonialists' vision of American independence from England and the nature of the ensuing government. Though he rejected the Bible and Christianity, he was a firm believer in God, as this quote from the book demonstrates:

Do we want to contemplate His power? We see it in the immensity of the creation. Do we want to contemplate His wisdom? We see it in the unchangeable order by which the incomprehensible whole is governed. Do we want to contemplate His munificence? We see it in the abundance with which He fills the earth. Do we want to contemplate His mercy? We see it in His not withholding that abundance even from the unthankful.

His belief in God made me more open to his writings than to those of most modern atheistic skeptics. Anyone who denied God's existence was, in my opinion, unworthy of attention. I discovered that Paine was not a biblical scholar, and many of his assertions were speculative, ill-founded and intemperate, but some arguments were as disturbing as they were eloquent, particularly the following:

Besides, the character of Moses, as stated in the Bible, is the most horrid that can be imagined. If those accounts be true, he was the wretch that first began and carried on wars on the score or on the pretence of religion; and under that mask, or that infatuation, committed the most unexampled atrocities that are to be found in the history of any nation. Of which I will state only one instance:

When the Jewish army returned from one of their plundering and murdering excursions, the account goes on as follows (Numbers xxxi. 13): "And Moses, and Eleazar the priest, and all the princes of the congregation, went forth to meet them without the camp; and Moses was wroth with the officers of the host, with the captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, which came from the battle; and Moses said unto them, "Have ye saved all the women alive?" behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore, "kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known a man by lying with him; but all the women-children that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for Yourselves."

Among the detestable villains that in any period of the world have disgraced the name of man, it is impossible to find a greater than Moses, if this account be true. Here is an order to butcher the boys, to massacre the mothers, and debauch the daughters.

Let any mother put herself in the situation of those mothers, one child murdered, another destined to violation, and herself in the hands of an executioner: let any daughter put herself in the situation of those daughters, destined as a prey to the murderers of a mother and a brother, and what will be their feelings? It is in vain that we attempt to impose upon nature, for nature will have her course, and the religion that tortures all her social ties is a false religion.

After this detestable order, follows an account of the plunder taken, and the manner of dividing it; and here it is that the profaneness of priestly hypocrisy increases the catalogue of crimes. Verse 37, "And the Lord's tribute of the sheep was six hundred and threescore and fifteen; and the beeves were thirty and six thousand, of which the Lord's tribute was threescore and twelve; and the asses were thirty thousand, of which the Lord's tribute was threescore and one; and the persons were sixteen thousand, of which the Lord's tribute was thirty and two." In short, the matters contained in this chapter, as well as in many other parts of the Bible, are too horrid for humanity to read, or for decency to hear; for it appears, from the 35th verse of this chapter, that the number of women-children consigned to debauchery by the order of Moses was thirty-two thousand.

People in general know not what wickedness there is in this pretended word of God. Brought up in habits of superstition, they take it for granted that the Bible is true, and that it is good; they permit themselves not to doubt of it, and they carry the ideas they form of the benevolence of the Almighty to the book which they have been taught to believe was written by his authority. Good heavens! it is quite another thing, it is a book of lies, wickedness, and blasphemy; for what can be greater blasphemy, than to ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty!

Not only were my modern ethical sensibilities challenged by passages like these, but I perceived that such commands stood in contradiction to other biblical teachings like the Golden Rule. I had heard a number of explanations as to why the Old Testament morality differs from the New, but these now began to seem like mere rationalizations. And I confess I became weary of the rationalizations, concluding there could never be a legitimate explanation for self-serving behavior like the above. Any attempt to explain it away only lowered my respect for the apologists doing the explaining. Why would anyone, particularly mothers who love their daughters and daughters who value their dignity, even *want* to try to defend passages like these? The very inclination to justify such barbarism revealed to me the unyielding grip of an absolute faith upon its adherents. By Christmas of 2000 I found myself once more in the morass of doubt, and I have not considered myself a Christian believer since that time.

This time around, it was not only the Old Testament that drove me to doubt, but increasingly the New Testament as well. While the Old Testament can seem cruel in its advocacy of genocide and capital punishment for Sabbath breakers and rebellious sons, all these punishments are limited to the present life, while the New Testament suggests that unbelievers will spend an eternity of conscious torment in hell, an infinitely worse proposition than being stoned to death. I could no longer believe that a God who enjoins us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek could be capable of subjecting his own

enemies to endless punishment, with no further offer of mercy or reprieve (cf. Hebrews 9:27; 10:26-27). Why not simply annihilate his rebellious subjects and put them out of their misery?

Another objection to the NT I began to consider at this time was the failure of Jesus to return in the generation of his disciples as he promised in Matt. 16:27-28 and 24:34, etc. Comparing these two passages, as well as the context of the whole NT, in which Jesus' return was expected in that generation, a strong case can be made that this is really what Jesus meant (or that this is what the writers who reported Jesus' words intended to convey). This has been a longstanding problem for NT scholars. The problem is so acute that C.S. Lewis, arguably the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century, acknowledged this is what Jesus meant, but that he in his humanity was limited in his foreknowledge, so that he did not in fact return in that generation as predicted:

The facts, then, are these: that Jesus professed himself (in some sense) ignorant, and within a moment showed that he really was so. To believe in the Incarnation, to believe that he is God, makes it hard to understand how he could be ignorant; but also makes it certain that, if he said he could be ignorant, then ignorant he could really be. For a God who can be ignorant is less baffling than a God who falsely professes ignorance (from C. S. Lewis, "The World's Last Night" (1960), in *The Essential C.S. Lewis*, p. 385)

Lewis' solution, which mistakenly equates false prophecy with ignorance (why prophesy concerning matters about which one is ignorant?), cannot be entertained by those who believe Jesus was without error in all he said. The following biblical passage shuts out this possibility:

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him (Deut. 18:21-22).

I had often heard evangelicals poking fun at Jehovah's Witnesses for their failed prophecies of Christ's return, yet most of my acquaintances were oblivious to the same problem in the NT. In an alternative attempt to address the issue of Jesus' predicted early return, a significant minority of evangelicals hold to a preterist view of prophecy, maintaining that Jesus did in fact return in the first century:

If Jesus meant what He said, said what He meant, and was an infallible Prophet, all the components of his prophecy must stand or fall together. These certainly include his coming on the clouds with power and glory. The failure of any one component to occur within that existing generation would disqualify Jesus as a prophet and call into question the truth of Scripture. If He did not return when He said He would, we have a dilemma of huge proportions (from the Prophecy Reformation Institute, <http://www.prophecyrefi.org/excerpt4.htm>).

It is doubtless the lack of evidence for Jesus' return in the first century that allows most evangelicals to dismiss this view without serious consideration. But for preterists, the lack of evidence for Jesus' past return is less of a problem than is any attempt to twist the face value of Jesus' prophecies to allow for his return in a later generation. Likewise, for Lewis it was less problematic to believe that Jesus was mistaken than to reinterpret his words in the manner that most evangelicals tend to do in order to get around the first-generation problem. This is a dilemma for which there is no good solution, and I cannot believe that Jesus has returned in the past or will ever return in the future.

One final thought on Jesus' promised return. The New Testament repeatedly warns its first century readers that the time is short and that they are to conduct themselves with the knowledge of his immanent return. Yet fifty generations have come and gone since the time of Jesus, so we are confronted in this generation with the question: Are we more likely to meet our Maker through the return of Jesus or through death? For fifty generations, the answer has been death. If this is the case, then it would have made more sense for the NT writers to be more concerned with their readers' readiness for death than with their readiness for Jesus' return.

The gospel resurrection accounts presented another source of doubt. Among many other difficulties, it was hard for me to avoid the conclusion that Luke and John intended to place Jesus' first appearance in Jerusalem, while Matthew has it in Galilee at the other end of Palestine. The problem is not incidental; the authors repeatedly make their intention clear. For my analysis of the issue, see Appendix D.

Though I wanted a world in which God was active, my personal observations during my admittedly young but well-traveled life had never encountered an unambiguous supernatural event. In seeking continuity with the scriptural narratives, it was fashionable to use the term "miracle" rather liberally in my Christian milieu, and I myself employed it from time to time. But I couldn't help thinking that our prayers for healing were a charade: In corporate prayer groups we petitioned God to heal our colds, knowing there would be no difference between believers and unbelievers in the rate of our recovery. We never prayed for an amputee's leg to grow back or for a woman with a hysterectomy to have a child, because we knew it was impossible. We prayed only for the possible, and those who prayed for the truly impossible and claimed it happened were disingenuous, like the televangelists. James' promise of healing upon offering a prayer of faith in conjunction with anointing oil (a suggestion my parents followed) seemed hollow after the slow, painful death of my mother and many others. Elijah's floating ax head (2 Kings 6:6) was a capricious joke in comparison. I came to believe that God, while able to intervene, expressly constrains himself from intervening in the world. This did not fully answer the problem of suffering, but it did for me vindicate God from the charge of arbitrary intervention by which he solves a trivial problem here but not a holocaust there. I had become a full-fledged deist.

In addition to Thomas Paine, I voraciously consumed books from a variety of perspectives, Christian and otherwise, opening up intellectual vistas I had been sheltered from all my life. Instrumental in cementing an empirical worldview were Harvard

entomologist E. O. Wilson's *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, which painted a neo-deistic vision of a universe that follows natural laws from the motion of the planets to the neurons in our brains; Roger Fout's *Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees*, which astounded me with the great deal of intellectual similarities between chimps and humans; and Ed Babinski's *Leaving the Fold: Testimonies of Former Fundamentalists*.

Breaking the news of my relapse to Charlene was difficult, and she was understandably upset, but I could not pretend to believe what I thought to be untrue. Despite the challenges raised by our differences, my love for Charlene has remained steady, and our relationship, while occasionally strained, has stayed strong.

Wycliffe was generous in its severance package, offering continued financial support until February 2001. Though our support had been waning since the time of our return from Cantor, we were able to make ends meet until I found a computer programming job in December 2000 at a small software company near Dallas, a job I have held up through the present. I returned to Cantor in January 2001 to sell our remaining possessions and to say good-bye to our colleagues and Cantorian friends there. It was difficult to come to terms with the fact that I had lost my role in God's eternal purpose that had originally led us to Cantor. No longer was I a part of that tight-knit group of Christians who stood together through the heat, dust, and material and cultural challenges to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. These challenges had seemed a small price to pay in return for the fellowship and sense of purpose that came from answering God's call. With all this behind me, I still firmly believed in God and continued to seek him, but was puzzled by his silence and my inability to discern the purpose of my existence.

To illustrate the extent to which I was convinced of God's existence, I include here an excerpt from a message I had written to Robert Price (the agnostic whose previously mentioned writings had heavily influenced me toward skepticism) in July 2001.

I've often pondered the long path you've taken from fundamentalism to agnosticism if not atheism. For now I've found a stopping place in Deism, having read Thomas Paine and some of the articles in [deism.com](http://deism.com) and [deism.org](http://deism.org). Along with Einstein, I cannot conceive of how the mechanisms that generated matter, space, time and the physical laws of the universe came into being naturalistically. I understand that there are naturalistic explanations for how matter and the universe may have come into being, but who/what made the naturalism on which these things were based? No matter how far one goes back in making explanations, there is always a prior something upon which the explanations must be founded. In answer to the question, "how did the original bootstraps get pulled up?", I am compelled to imagine an entity outside the constraints of natural law. Perhaps you could comment on how you have answered that question for yourself. I accept evolution (in fact have spent much time recently debating my Christian friends on the subject), but am drawn to the mystery and wisdom of the intelligence that set the whole process in motion. Further, I do continue to seek God, believing s/he knows my thoughts, cares for me and desires for me to grow morally, even if s/he does not as a matter of principle pull any strings on my behalf in response to my prayers. I

confess that this vision of God, the God of Deism, raises a number of unanswered questions, but fewer questions than the vision of the God of the Bible. However, I have not shut the door on Christianity, perhaps because 1) I'm attracted to the kind of God who would intervene directly and self-sacrificially on behalf of his creation, 2) practically all my friends and family, including my wife, whom I dearly love, are evangelical Christians (not a good reason from an intellectual perspective, but it is a major personal factor) and 3) if Christianity turns out to be true, despite appearances, and I spend my life opposing it, then I'm in eternal trouble with the my Maker and Redeemer. If it were only flat earthers and young-earth-creationist types who believed it, I might be able to dismiss it quite readily. But there are some very intelligent, scholarly people who accept it (e.g., C. S. Lewis, Kenneth Miller, Alvin Plantinga), and I keep scratching my head, wondering how they, as intelligent and educated as they are, could believe something that I, as a relative peon, find so incongruous. Even if there's only a 10% chance they're right, I hesitate to reject it completely, knowing the possible consequences. I would not get into an airplane if I knew there was a 10% chance of its crashing. This must appear to you as intellectual cowardice (it does to me too), but as one who is at least in part motivated by self-preservation, I would like to be virtually 100% sure that Christianity is untrue before closing the door on it.

### **3.2 Crisis #6: From deism to agnosticism**

Though I never saw theism and naturalistic science as mutually exclusive, the more I reflected on the nature of evolution, the more troubled I became about its theological implications. The problem of suffering and evil is a reality whether or not evolution is true, but evolution brought it into greater focus for me. Bertrand Russell captured my growing uneasiness:

Since evolution became fashionable, the glorification of Man has taken a new form. We are told that evolution has been guided by one great Purpose: through the millions of years when there were only slime, or trilobites, throughout the ages of dinosaurs and giant ferns, of bees and wild flowers, God was preparing the Great Climax. At last, in the fullness of time, He produced Man, including such specimens as Nero and Caligula, Hitler and Mussolini, whose transcendent glory justified the long painful process. For my part, I find even eternal damnation less incredible, and certainly less ridiculous, than this lame and impotent conclusion which we are asked to admire as the supreme effort of Omnipotence. And if God is indeed omnipotent, why could He not have produced the glorious result without such a long and tedious prologue? (from *Unpopular Essays*, p. 72).

As did Richard Dawkins:

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all

kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference (in "God's Utility Function," published in *Scientific American* (November, 1995), p. 85).

I corresponded extensively by e-mail with Christians to discuss the merits of our respective beliefs in 2001-2002. One correspondent was particularly effective in pointing out the shortcomings of deism. My side of a set of dialogues is preserved in Appendix F. I continued reading various perspectives on philosophy and was moved particularly by the criticisms of deism (and other religions) by the renowned and reviled nineteenth-century agnostic Robert Ingersoll in his *Why Am I an Agnostic* (1889):

Most people, after arriving at the conclusion that Jehovah is not God, that the Bible is not an inspired book, and that the Christian religion, like other religions, is the creation of man, usually say: "There must be a Supreme Being, but Jehovah is not his name, and the Bible is not his word. There must be somewhere an over-ruling Providence or Power."

This position is just as untenable as the other. He who cannot harmonize the cruelties of the Bible with the goodness of Jehovah, cannot harmonize the cruelties of Nature with the goodness and wisdom of a supposed Deity. He will find it impossible to account for pestilence and famine, for earthquake and storm, for slavery, for the triumph of the strong over the weak, for the countless victories of injustice. He will find it impossible to account for martyrs--for the burning of the good, the noble, the loving, by the ignorant, the malicious, and the infamous.

How can the Deist satisfactorily account for the sufferings of women and children? In what way will he justify religious persecution--the flame and sword of religious hatred? Why did his God sit idly on his throne and allow his enemies to wet their swords in the blood of his friends? Why did he not answer the prayers of the imprisoned, of the helpless? And when he heard the lash upon the naked back of the slave, why did he not also hear the prayer of the slave? And when children were sold from the breasts of mothers, why was he deaf to the mother's cry?

It seems to me that the man who knows the limitations of the mind, who gives the proper value to human testimony, is necessarily an Agnostic. He gives up the hope of ascertaining first or final causes, of comprehending the supernatural, or of conceiving of an infinite personality. From out the words Creator, Preserver, and Providence, all meaning falls (from Bank of Wisdom Box 926, Louisville, KY 402015).<sup>vi</sup>[7]

Though I followed Ingersoll's reasoning, I found it hard to abandon the conviction that there was a Supreme Being who had at least set the cosmos in motion. I had earlier come

to terms with a God who did not reveal himself to his creatures through the Bible or any other book and whose purposes were hidden from us, yet I still gained comfort from the belief that a personal God did in fact exist and that we were here for a reason, even if we were ignorant of that reason. The transition from deism to agnosticism was in some respects as frightening as that from Christianity to deism.

I had nurtured a hope of an afterlife, but that prospect faded the more I considered evolution and the variety of life from protozoa to fish, reptiles, birds, mammals, apes, hominids and humans. Through which twigs in this great bush of life can we draw a line between creatures that end their lives in the grave and those that continue through eternity? Insects, slugs, lizards, mice, dogs, dolphins, chimpanzees, *Homo erectus*, or just *Homo sapiens*? When defending God's purposes in the natural suffering of animals, C. S. Lewis speculated that they may be given a place in the afterlife, yet it would be a stretch to think that all the lower animals could participate. When a chimpanzee dies of hunger or cancer or from the brutality of a fellow chimp, is there any consolation of eternal bliss in the hereafter? What leads us to believe that we, of all creatures, will live in a place where all our tears and pain will be wiped away and where we'll be reunited with our loved ones and our creator? While it was painful to acknowledge the likelihood that there is nothing beyond the grave, I was able to find consolation in the thought that even if this is so, there will indeed be no pain, no tears, no regrets, no bereavement, no disappointment, nothing.

In October 2001 there was an incident reported in the local news that tipped my perspective farther from deism toward an atheistic-leaning agnosticism. A driver struck a pedestrian on a freeway in Fort Worth and continued the journey home, parking in the garage with the victim still on the hood of the car. The victim was conscious and pled for help, but the driver simply left him there for four days until he died, then with the help of a friend, dumped the body in a local park. The universal reaction to this incident was one of shock and outrage. Yet as I considered the millions of children who have died of starvation, wasting disease and natural disasters, knowing that an omnipotent God could have come to their rescue but did not, it was difficult not to see a parallel between God and the negligent driver. The more I contemplated the world in which we live, the harder it became to identify any clues that a benevolent, omnipotent Personality intervenes and orchestrates any of the events in our lives.

When responding to difficult questions about God's nature, such as his apparent failure to intervene on behalf of suffering children, it is common for Christians to maintain that, like a dog undergoing a painful medical procedure, we cannot understand God's purposes in all that happens; we must simply trust that God knows what he is doing. This may be the case, but if so, how can anyone be held accountable for thinking like the dog, for failing to grasp that the purposes of God, if he exists, are good? We do not blame the dog for its reaction to the medical procedure. If we cannot imagine a good reason for the starvation or slow death of a child or a chimpanzee (the latter casting doubt on the argument that unexplained trials are intended for the development of people's character as a precursor to dwelling with God for eternity) due to leukemia, and our minds lead us to consider that God is either not good, not omnipotent, or nonexistent, is this grounds for

the infinite wrath of God, even if he does in fact exist? Does God give us a mind and prevent us from drawing natural conclusions on pain of eternal punishment? It seems to me that such a stance is driven not by reason, or even by love, but by fear--fear that, whether or not traditional notions make sense, God may indeed turn out to be an infinite, exacting judge to those who question him. Might makes right, if you will.

Other troubling questions came to mind that I had never heard discussed in evangelical circles. These conundrums in themselves did not prove to me that God does not exist, and I did not deny the possibility there may be good answers for them, or answers beyond my ability to comprehend. But they illustrated to me that, by invoking the concept of a Prime Mover, i.e., God, to explain the problem of the origin of the universe (setting aside the problem of his origin), a number of other problems arise in its stead, some of them no less perplexing than the original problem that led to positing God in the first place. Here are a few of the many that have occurred to me: If God is infinite, and the universe is finite, how much relative effort did it take for God to design and create the world? Anything finite compared to infinity is nothing. How much effort does it take him to keep us free from disease or accidents, or to give us a raise on the job or a nice tax refund, or to watch the miracle of a baby developing from conception to adulthood through gene expression and natural development? Did he make himself good, or does he simply happen to be good? If the latter, what choice does he have but to be good, and if he has no choice, can he legitimately be considered a free agent rather than subject to a higher law of goodness outside himself? Is his wisdom a virtue; does he carefully decide between two options and select the best, or does he automatically know what is best as a result of his omniscience? Is there any virtue in that which requires no effort? If God is not bound by time, how can he decide to do or create anything? We cannot conceive of the acts of thinking, deciding and creating apart from time. These acts require a progression in time, moving from one state of mind and activity to another. If there was a "time" when there was no time or matter, at what "point" and in what manner, in all the infinite reaches of non-time and non-space, was it possible "suddenly" for God to "decide" to create time, space and matter? Again, some will perceive these as impertinent questions, sophistry on the order of Zeno's paradoxes, but they are honest questions, and suppressing honest questions is no virtue. If God does exist, surely he is big enough to bear them. Or must we make him out to be like a human despot, a king who cannot tolerate any challenge to his authority or existence? I do not know whether God exists--at the moment I have grave doubts--but I am convinced that if he does exist, he knows my thoughts; I cannot hide them, and he must not mind my expressing them. I have asked him on many occasions to reveal himself to me and to overturn my doubts if they are ill-founded. So far this has not happened, either through a heavenly or still small voice, through scripture, or through the admonitions of many concerned believers.

But what of the Big Question: How did matter, the natural laws and the Big Bang all originate? How could something have come from nothing? Scientists do not have definitive answers to the question of how everything began, nor do I. There is growing evidence that space is effectively infinite, and clues that ours is not the only universe (see the May 2003 issue of *Scientific American*), which may help explain why the natural laws in our particular universe happen to be conducive to life, but this simply pushes back the

question one step further. How did whatever first began begin? When theists pose this question, atheists typically retort with, "Well, how did God begin?" To which theists respond, "God is not a part of the physical world, but stands outside of it, so the question is irrelevant." The arguments can go on and on, but in the end, both positions seem to raise imponderable, insoluble questions. Atheists start with science, and theists start with God--both accept some sort of eternal reality.

I was and am, quite frankly, unable to fathom it all. In this respect, I am like those of antiquity who pondered the foundation of the earth. The earth is solid; what does it rest on? There was no empirical means to investigate the question at the time, but rather than admitting and accepting their ignorance, they felt compelled to speculate and pass on their speculations through tradition. Thus, various cultures believed the earth rested on elephants, turtles or pillars. The Hebrews apparently favored the pillar theory:

He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and he hath set the world upon them (1 Sam. 2:8).

Consider the following fictitious scenario, set in 1000 BC in southern Asia. Tradition has established that the earth rests on elephants. A boy named Rajah, like all his peers, grows up accepting this view, but as he reaches intellectual maturity, he begins reflecting on the difficulties associated with it. For instance, What are the elephants standing on? Where did the elephants come from? What do the elephants eat? Rajah begins posing these questions to some of the community sages, but instead of answering his questions, they accuse him of disloyalty to the sacred traditions and ask, "If the earth is not standing on elephants, what supports it? The earth is firm; it must be supported by something, and if you can't come up with a better solution than elephants, you must accept that elephants indeed support it. Or do you think there is nothing to support the earth? Virtually everyone from every culture accepts that there must be something solid underneath the earth to support it--whether pillars, turtles or elephants. To doubt the existence of these elephants--or pillars or turtles--is simply ludicrous! You must make a decision one way or another, and your eternal fate rests on your choice." Rajah agrees that it seems reasonable for the earth to be supported by something firm, but in the absence of any evidence as to the nature of that support, thinks it best to withhold judgment as to whether that support consists of elephants, pillars or turtles, or perhaps something else that no one has yet considered. So despite the threats of the sages, he does what he must do--profess his ongoing ignorance as to the nature of the earth's supports. He remains an agnostic, and in his lifetime he is reviled and fails to be vindicated. It is not until centuries later that science empirically determines the true nature of the earth's support: It was all a show put on by Hollywood. Just kidding--it was gravity and centrifugal force, which no one in their wildest dreams could have imagined in Rajah's day.

Given the track record of pre-modern speculation versus the results of science, it seems reasonable to withhold judgment on ultimate questions, even the existence of God, until or unless empirical evidence can be brought to bear on them, or until God reveals himself personally, directly and unmistakably to us--not to ancient writers whose claims of

inspiration cannot be authenticated--but to *us*. All natural phenomena--rain, lightning, disease, dust devils, crop growth and failure, etc.--have in various cultures been attributed to gods, demons and other spiritual forces. Dr. Price, a theologian living in Massachusetts, objected to the use of Benjamin Franklin's lightning rods because it removed lightning as a tool of God's judgment. God was not to be thwarted, however; Dr. Price noted that earthquakes became more frequent in the area as lightning rods became more common<sup>viii</sup>[8]. These quotes from Martin Luther further illustrate this outlook:<sup>ix</sup>[9]

"The heathen writes that the Comet may arise from natural causes; but God creates not one that does not foretoken a sure calamity." [Luther, *Advent Sermon*]

"As for the demented, I hold it certain that all beings deprived of reason are thus afflicted only by the Devil..."

"Satan produces all the maladies which afflict mankind for he is the prince of death..."

"Demons are in woods, in waters, in wildernesses, and in dark pooly places ready to hurt and prejudice people; some are also in thick black clouds, which cause hail, lightning and thunder, and poison the air, the pastures and grounds..."

History is full of such interpretations of God's activity in the world. Some modern Christians may think their predecessors' views curious, but still fail to learn the lesson of the priority that empiricism enjoys over metaphysical speculation. The great physician Hippocrates (460-377 BC) got it right:

Men think [a disease] divine merely because they do not understand it. But if they called everything divine which they do not understand, why, there would be no end of divine things (Cited in Solomon, Robert C., *A Short History of Philosophy*, 1996, p. 30).

Even today, there is a tendency for believers to appeal immediately to divine explanations for unknown phenomena, whether it be the naturalistic origin of the bacterial flagellum, of the first living creature, or of the universe itself.

Again, in the absence of an empirical foundation, or sound deductions based firmly on the same, or direct, tangible revelation from God, there can be no assurance that any dogma, scriptural or otherwise, has any basis in reality. Evangelical Christians who do not accept this premise and whose assurance is based primarily on their subjective personal experience or the authority of scripture would do well to consider the equally confident but misplaced assurance of adherents of other faiths. By virtue of our human nature, it is much more difficult for us to see the flaws in others' thinking than in our own. We may pay lip service to this fact, but we rarely take it seriously enough to consider that we--we--might actually be mistaken at the core of our worldview. In response to the question, "What about sincere followers of other religions? What is their fate?", I have heard evangelicals say, "They may be sincere, but they are sincerely mistaken." Those who speak with this sort of callous nonchalance concerning the eternal

destiny of unbelievers, are they willing to consider the possibility that they too may be sincerely mistaken?

During my years as a Christian (and even afterward), every now and then I would sense what I thought was God's presence, a warm, beautiful sensation flooding my soul as I talked to God (or sometimes when hearing a patriotic song or stirring classical music, but that's another category, or so I thought). In early 2002 I was in the bathroom at work, waiting for some indication to come from God concerning the truth of Christianity. I prayed, as I had prayed many times before, "God, if Jesus is your Son, I accept his sacrifice for my sins, and I ask you to help me believe." Immediately this same wonderful sensation flooded my soul. I was excited. But wanting to know if the sensation was from God or just psychological, I prayed, "God, if you are Allah, and if Mohammed is your prophet, please let me know." And the same sensation came over me! What was I to make of that? I cannot doubt that Mormons and members of other faiths experience this same phenomenon when they talk about the "burning in the bosom" as a way of authenticating their faith. Given this reality, I don't think it's unwarranted to ask for more than a sense of God's presence, a satisfaction with the doctrines of a particular faith, a sense of joy, the fellowship of believers, or a could-be-miracle to authenticate the kinds of claims that are made by most religions. If God truly intervenes in people's hearts, why did he allow this real sense of peace, what seemed like God's presence, to flood my soul in both cases, rather than in just the first case or in neither case? If God, being able to intervene in any way, had prevented any sensation at all, I would have been left much less confused. Though I continue to pray occasionally for God to make himself known to me if he exists, this experience marked a turning point, a loss of expectation of ever hearing from God after years of seeking him.

### **3.3 Implications of my decision**

In discussing my doubts with believers, the most persistent objection raised is that, if Christianity is not true, and if there is no afterlife, and God either does not exist or does not intervene in the world, then what is the basis for morality and ultimate meaning in life? Should we not simply eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die? My first response is that reality does not bend to suit our desires. If we find it unpalatable to believe that this life is all there is, our desire for it not to be so does not make it not so. If we are sufficiently dismayed at the thought that our temporal efforts and virtuous acts have no eternal significance, does our dismay have any chance of changing reality, if indeed reality runs contrary to our wishes? We may hold out hope that there is more to life than this, in the same way that a mother whose son has been missing in action for twenty years may hope he is alive and will return, but our hope does not change reality if there is nothing beyond the grave, any more than the mother's hope can bring her son back to life if in fact he is dead.

Admittedly, the above response does not paint a pretty picture of reality, and it is not likely to entice anyone toward skepticism. I freely confess it was not pleasant to come to terms with the finality of my life and eventual death here on earth, particularly after having lived with the prior conviction that, as a missionary bringing God's word to the

unreached Butu people, my every act was imbued with eternal significance. I wish I could say I have heroically surmounted the psychological loss of purpose since finding the truth, but that would not be entirely accurate. From time to time I do struggle with the meaning of my existence, but life goes on, and though there is no longer an ultimate meaning *to* life, there remain multiple meanings *in* life<sup>x</sup>[10]. I can still bask in the love of my wife and children, find satisfaction in my computer programming work, enjoy running with our dog, watch a good movie, read intellectually stimulating books and discuss them with friends, play a game of chess with my sons, play tag with my daughter, tickle my children half to death, contribute to charitable causes and savor a handful or two of roasted sunflower seeds. I may not retain this optimistic picture of life if a crippling disaster befalls me, but I can only take one day at a time. I am not directly engaged in any significant humanitarian efforts other than through financial contributions, but I look forward to becoming more involved in the future as family and work responsibilities permit.

I have continued to attend an evangelical church with my wife and children in spite of my new outlook. In matters of belief, I have no choice but to believe what I think is true, and to disbelieve what I think untrue. I cannot, for example, choose to believe that the earth is flat if I don't really think it is. Admonitions like, "You must choose to believe" are incomprehensible to me. But in matters of practice, I retain the option of choosing my behavior (at least, that is my perception), even if it seems incongruous with my beliefs. So I attend church for the sake of my wife and for the chance to interact with friends. I am not sour against Christians in general, and I believe many have made the world a better place through their sacrificial devotion to the needy and the outcast. Perhaps because of my upbringing and family connections, I remain more comfortable interacting with socially conservative Christians than with those of looser morals.

Regarding morality, though I no longer believe in an objective body of laws handed down from a transcendent Lawgiver, I do accept that some behaviors are healthier than others for the well-being of society. I do not wish to live in a society in which murder is rampant, so I am against murder. I want other people to trust what I say, so I refrain from lying. I want other people to be kind to me, so I strive to be kind to others. I want my marriage to be happy, so I strive to please my wife, though I have much room for growth. I love my wife and want my family to remain intact, so I remain faithful to my wife. I want my children to flourish, so I spend time with them and love them. I gain satisfaction from supporting the poor and sick, and I would like other people to support me should I fall into poverty myself (cf. 2 Cor. 8:14), so I contribute financially to their cause. I am not bound by a higher authority to do these things, but I find them desirable, so I pursue them. I do not judge others for having different perspectives unless their behavior results in harm to society or to those whom I love.

When a Christian friend recently asked, "Is it more difficult to live morally now than when you were a believer?" he was somewhat surprised when I said no. I am still the same person with the same weaknesses and strengths as I ever was, and it is neither harder nor easier to refrain from temptation now than it was before. My greatest struggle is with laziness and procrastination, a battle I fight (and often lose) daily. At times I get

angry and yell at my kids, though no more now than when I was a believer. I can be argumentative and arrogant when presenting my views to others; this may indeed be one temptation I have fallen prey to more often as an unbeliever as the opportunities for confrontation have grown. While a Christian, I often prayed to avoid sexual temptation, but I no longer do so now, and the temptations are no greater. When pornographic spam e-mail finds its way into my inbox, I simply think, "If I look at this, how will it affect my relationship to my wife and family?" At that moment I just resolve not to look at it, then delete it and go on. I do not think of Satan or the Holy Spirit or any eternal reward or punishment during these times; it's just a matter of resolving to do what I believe is in my best interest. Not long ago, when looking for a lost dog leash, I said to my children, "Whoever finds the leash first gets a candy." My six-year-old son asked, "What if *you* find it first, Dad? Do *you* get to have a candy?" My eight-year-old son responded, "He's an adult; he can have as many candies as he wants." Some Christians believe that, in the absence of divine restraints, we would all fall into debauchery, eating as many candies as we want, so to speak. But this ignores the fact that, in general, living morally benefits us *in this life*, and there are many good reasons to behave ourselves other than the fear of future punishment or the desire to please our Maker.

I do not deny the power of Christian community to encourage believers to change their lives or to turn from crime to benevolent action. Though this positive force for morality exists in most religions, it does not establish the truthfulness of these religions, only their efficacy. As I have witnessed the lives of many believers and unbelievers, including my own life, I do not believe in any supernatural agent who helps us live righteously or tempts us to sin. We must take responsibility for our own actions, never chalking up our failures to Satan or to the inactivity of the Holy Spirit. In a recent television documentary on addiction, a former alcoholic testified to his failed experience with a number of self-help programs. He finally succeeded when he decided to make up his own twelve-step program: "I skipped over the first eleven steps, then made up the twelfth: Just quit drinking!" Granted, we should not make an idol or object of pride out of our willpower, as C. S. Lewis warns, but neither should we avoid the full use of our will for good.

Some believers who have managed to read up to this point will still wonder, "Why did he do it? Why did he leave the riches of his faith for the despair and danger of unbelief? It couldn't be that he sincerely believes Christianity to be untrue; there must be some deep underlying issues he's dealing with, some flaw, some hidden agenda, some dashed expectation." I have been asked this question directly, and my response was this: You can dig as deeply as you like, and when you get to the bottom of it, you'll find I believe what I believe *because I think it's true*. There may indeed be some hidden issues that have driven me to this point, but if so, they are as hidden to me as to anyone else. I have shared freely to others and to God the matters I consider relevant to the question, but nothing definitive has turned up.

What is the source of Christians' reluctance to accept the above simple explanation for my unbelief? I cannot speak for all, but as a former Christian, I can relate how I think I may have internally processed a story like mine:

He appears to be sincere, and he seems to have been a genuine believer, but he has now rejected God, so despite appearances, it may be that he never experienced a true relationship with God. According to Hebrews 10:26-27, the penalty for rejecting Christ after having followed him is eternal judgment with no further hope for redemption, so Ken must be in danger of this judgment. He claims his motives are pure, and that he truly perceives Christianity to be untrue, but there must be some fundamental flaw in him, something that marks him off from other believers who remain faithful to the faith, or he could not justly be subject to the judgment described in Hebrews 10. I don't know what it is, but I trust God's word over Ken's. His willingness to embrace something as problematic as evolution and to believe that the universe could have come from nothing must indicate an underlying desire to disbelieve despite the evidence for God and the Bible. At times he displays an argumentative, arrogant spirit, which may reveal a willful rebellion against God. Perhaps his motives are not as pure as he claims.

On the other hand, he does seem to be aware that he's putting the eternal fate of his soul in jeopardy if he turns out to be wrong, so he must have a high degree of confidence in his belief that the gospel is not true. What could possibly have motivated him and driven him to such a degree of certainty that he would be willing to invite the disapproval of his friends, family, supporters and mission board, to live without the hope of a hereafter, to abandon his calling and sense of purpose, and to risk divine judgment? Perhaps 2 Thess. 2:10-12 pertains to him: "God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." This could mean he truly does believe what he says he believes, but God has brought this on him because of his rebellious spirit and his failure to acknowledge God for who he is. Only God knows his heart; it may be that Ken will ultimately recognize his error and return to God, refined by fire and more useful to God than before.

I invite Christian readers to consider the possibility that my certainty is a result not of divine or diabolical deception but of a simple weighing of the evidence. It would be impossible for me to relate here the volumes of arguments I have considered on both sides of the question, but it is my hope that those who are unable or unwilling to read extensively on the skeptical side of the question would be moved to consider the possibility that I may have legitimate reasons for taking the position I have taken, given my willingness to risk my eternal destiny as a result of what I have come to believe. I am not a scholar, and there are many Christians who are better informed than I. The same could be said of many Muslim scholars and atheist philosophers. What are we to make of a world in which different people come to different conclusions on so many matters? Children who grow up in a Muslim environment tend to become Muslims, many of whom are peace loving, earnest and sincere in their faith, believing that members of other faiths risk eternal damnation. Few of them even entertain the possibility that Christianity is true, and deem the risk of Christian hell to be so small as not to warrant their consideration, even though the consequences of being mistaken are infinitely grave (no pun intended). Christians tend to view Muslim hell with the same disregard. While religious believers accept the existence of their own hell and reject all others, skeptics--at least this one--discount all hells and do not lose any sleep over the possibility that one or another may exist. The depth of one's conviction can be gauged in proportion to the consequences of being mistaken. The fact that most Christians do not fear Muslim hell,

despite its dreadfulness, effectively demonstrates that they do not believe it exists or that they are subject to it. The fact that I do not fear either Christian or Muslim hell establishes the same for me. Christians may bet their earthly life on the truth of the gospel, but I am betting my eternity (if I have one) on its falsehood.

It goes without saying that strong, contrasting opinions can be held by various peoples and individuals with equal sincerity. This is as true of mundane matters, like the shape of the earth, as it is of matters of great importance, such as the ultimate purpose of life. Where these views are opposed to each other, either they are all mistaken, or only one is true. It could be that we are all fundamentally mistaken in our views about ultimate reality, or it could be that Christians are correct, or Muslims or atheists, but not all at the same time. Now, if God exists and desires the allegiance of all his creatures, it seems odd that he would allow such a state of affairs to exist, one in which equally sincere people come to diametrically opposed views on the nature or existence of God, in the same way that they have historically come to different views on the shape and age of the earth, the origin of disease, the appropriateness of dancing, or the relative merits of Macintosh versus Windows PCs. The same psychology, the same defensiveness, the same argumentative spirit surfaced when geocentrists sparred with heliocentrists as when Christians debate with Muslims or atheists. But if there is no personal God, then this state of affairs--the confusion and conflict that reign from the mundane to the critical, from the dawn of man up to the present--is precisely what we would expect in a world in which there is no personal Creator who reveals himself to his children. It may be that I am wrong. It may be that I have not sought God sufficiently, or studied the Bible thoroughly enough, or listened carefully enough to the many Christians who have admonished me. Maybe if I could just be corrected in this or that point of misunderstanding, or if I could adjust my disposition in one way or another, then the beauty of Christ and the message of the gospel would dawn on me once again. Maybe. But the fact that millions of seekers have lived and died, calling out to God for some definitive revelation but never receiving it, or receiving revelation that conflicts with the revelation others have found, contributes to my suspicion that there is no personal God who reveals himself to anyone.

Not long ago my six-year-old son Philip asked my wife, "Mommy, is daddy going to go to hell?" I appreciated her response: "I don't know. Only God knows his heart." I am grieved to think that my own son should be tormented with such thoughts at his tender age. Yet it serves no purpose for me to blame anyone; we all believe what seems true to us, and I must respect the right of others to hold views contrary to mine if I am to expect the same from them. It is not always easy to navigate this no-man's land between a Christian social life and an unbelieving intellect, but I persist for the love of my family and for the chance to show other doubters that it's possible for life to go on even after breaking with the faith for the sake of intellectual integrity. May I always stay on the journey to truth and remain faithful to my family.

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*Notes:*

[1] I concur with Blaise Pascal (*Pensées*) that no one, including myself, has ever sought God with *all* his heart. Not even Martin Luther, about whom it is said he prayed six hours a day, fits the bill. My friend may have (generously) misinterpreted my descriptions of the earnestness with which I have sought God.

ii[2] Available at [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/kendall\\_hobbs/no\\_longer.shtml](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/kendall_hobbs/no_longer.shtml)

iii[3] All sensitive geographical and group names have been changed.

iv[4] Available at [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert\\_price/beyond\\_born\\_again/index.shtml](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/beyond_born_again/index.shtml)

v[5] I did not seek permission from this correspondent to publish these brief, anonymous excerpts. For longer e-mail exchanges I have sought such permission, but my requests have been denied, and I am doubtful it would have been otherwise for these excerpts. However, I do think it helpful in documenting my journey to provide a sample of the kinds of reactions I have been met with.

vi[6] Derek E. Wildman, Monica Uddin, Guozhen Liu, Lawrence I. Grossman and Morris Goodman, "Implications of natural selection in shaping 99.4% nonsynonymous DNA identity between humans and chimpanzees: Enlarging genus *Homo*," Article #03-2172 in the May 19-May 23, 2003 issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, available at <http://www.pnas.org/> (or [http://www.med.wayne.edu/news\\_media/2003/press5.asp](http://www.med.wayne.edu/news_media/2003/press5.asp) for a press release).

vii[7] An extended version of this excerpt can be found in Appendix F or at [http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert\\_ingersoll/why\\_am\\_i\\_agnostic.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert_ingersoll/why_am_i_agnostic.html). It is well worth every believer's consideration.

viii[8] From Bertrand Russell's *Unpopular Essays*, Simon & Schuster, 1950, p. 74.

ix[9] From the collection of Luther's speeches with his friends, titled, *Table Talk*, a volume in *The Collected Works of Martin Luther*, quoted at <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/ce/4/part5.html>.

x[10] I borrowed this terminology from atheist Jeffery Lowder in his debate with Christian philosopher Phil Fernandez entitled "Naturalism vs. Theism: Where Does the Evidence Point?"