

Conversations with my friend, Byron

Questions about God

This series is based on a number of conversations I had with my friend Byron regarding the Christian faith over the years. Byron and I have known each other since we were 10 years old. The first time I met Byron is when his family moved into my childhood neighborhood. I was having a problem with his sister and Byron came to her rescue. We agreed to settle this issue like men—we raced each other. I can't remember what the consequences were if he or I won—the only thing I do remember is that he beat me, even though he had on these heavy tan waffle stomper boots, by quite a wide margin I might add. After my humiliating defeat we became the best of friends, culminating in him asking me to be the best man at his wedding.

In our twenties, Byron and I eventually grew apart, partly because he moved out of the Tacoma area with this new family and partly because I became a Christian. We both had to learn how to adapt to our new subcultures and new peer groups. But Byron and I have a history of laughter, and to this day, every time we get together we rehash those stories and laugh at them like they happened yesterday. I always feel sorry for my wife, Machele, because she has to listen to the same stories over and over again and pretend there still brand new and hilariously funny!

Byron's family has a religious heritage in the Mormon Church. He had an uncle who was a Bishop of his ward, and a grandfather, who Byron describes as "the best man that ever lived" because of his devotion to his family and his faith. Byron attended youth functions with the Mormons, but aside from some weekly activities and busting an occasional move on the dance floor, his involvement in the church was limited. He would be the first to tell you that he went more out of family obligation than he did out of a spiritual conviction. As Byron became a man his involvement in the church came to an end.

Since I have become a Christian we have had several conversations about God and Jesus, some serious, others sarcastic, others quite funny. He has given me permission to share some of his concerns when it comes to Christianity. Some of these will help Christians think through their own faith and be more equipped to engage others when it comes to tough questions, criticisms, or concerns about their faith.

Statement #1. You can't prove God; it is just a matter of faith

We live in a different era than the Biblical writers of the ancient world. For them, the presupposition was that there is a God and we want to find favor with him. One look at Genesis 1:1 and we can see this presupposition. *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."* The idea that we could exist and live on a planet we did not create led the ancients to hold firmly to a creator of life. There was no need to prove God because no one questioned it. But as science evolved, especially during the enlightenment era, mankind attempted to explain the world from a natural perspective, without the need for the supernatural force or being. The key to science is to find patterns in the natural world by testing existing hypothesis' over and over again. This is known as the scientific method.

The reality of science has been a blessing and we have experienced wonderful discoveries about the world we live in as a result. The problem occurs when we try to disprove the supernatural by the scientific method. It was never meant to take on this task. Instead, this kind of science is really philosophical naturalism. In other words, science cannot disprove God because He cannot be tested. Science is effective when it comes to observable stimuli. Anything beyond the observable becomes a philosophical theory.

Byron was adamant that I could not prove God and that it is merely a matter of personal faith. I did not dispel him; instead I affirmed his position. But I said that everyone lives their life based on a set of beliefs. Some believe in God; other's do not. The reality is that everyone lives their life based on a set of beliefs or what we would call faith. Just as it is not my job to disprove science; science can not disprove God.

I think that is the fundamental problem when it comes to religion and science. Both worldviews waste valuable time trying to discredit and disprove the other. Richard Dawkins, perhaps the most outspoken atheist, has made it his career to convince others there is no God because it would be a better world without Him. He further believes that science and religion are opposite extremes. According to him, one cannot believe both because they are incompatible intellectually. In other words, either there is a God and religion is true, or there is not and science is king.

Christians, on the other hand, tend to go to the other extreme. Many believe that God disproves science and that theories like evolution should not be taught in public school because the Bible makes it clear that He created everything. Many Christians want nothing to do with scientific textbooks and denounce them with passion. But is it possible that the existence of God and science can compliment each other? The forefathers of science like Bacon, Galileo, and Newton were devout Christians who used science in a way that glorified God's creation. The other day I read a statement by the Catholic church that stated evolution and God can be compatible. We may disagree on whether we all share a common ancestor or that a mutation can lead to a new species, but there are observable aspects of evolution that hold true. For example, adaptation (also called micro evolution in some circles) in species allows them to better adjust to their particular environment. Darwin discovered this during his time in the Galapagos Islands when he observed 13 types of finches and the reality that their beak size differed. He observed that on different sections on the island the food sources were different, which caused their beaks to accommodate the food source, like nuts, in their respective environments.

I personally hold to certain tenants of evolution; but I do so according to Genesis 1 where we are told that God made certain "kinds" of plants, birds, animals, yet He made mankind distinctly according to His image. I believe within those "kinds" the variations of animals in the dog family, or cat family, or bird family can produce different "kinds" of dogs, cats, or birds. Natural selection has helped me understand how this can all take place within an environment. What we disagree upon, namely that all creatures share a common ancestor, must be chalked up to a matter of one's personal belief. I cannot disprove evolution and evolution cannot disprove God. Each one must choose for themselves what they will believe. In the end, like I told Byron, we all live our lives by faith; that is, according to beliefs we share.

Statement #2: God would not judge those who are sincere about their Faith?

The next statement is a little more personal than the first simply because now we are talking about people—and for the most part—people we don't know. Yet still, these first two questions are really preliminary ones. The ones that are being withheld are the ones that are still more personal and shape one's worldview. The hope is that we handle these preliminary questions with gentleness and respect, which the apostle Peter instructs Christians to do in the Bible as we prepare to give answers for the hope that we have (1Peter 3:15-16).

15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. 17 It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Back to the premise: There are people who seem to be devout when it comes to their faith. We may know Muslims who pray to God five times a day, give to the poor, fast a month for Ramada, and read the Qur'an with devotion and consistency. We know there are committed Buddhists who spend their life denying themselves of pleasure so they can live in harmony with "the one." We also know there are Hindu's like Gandhi who rejected western thinking and liberated the nation of India from British rule without lifting a single weapon with his philosophy of *no resistance*. The list goes on and on. There are many who are devout and committed to making the world a better place through their faith. With that said, how could God judge them for trying to make the world a better place? This is a very delicate question where it seems no matter what you say you will fail.

The question does not revolve around whether these men and women are committed—obviously they are—instead it revolves around their belief system—namely whether or not it is true. In reality, the central figure in these discussions once again, revolves around the person of Jesus. Back in the biblical times, the apostle Paul had a similar situation involving devout Jews and the message of Jesus. Here is what he said.

10:1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.

3 Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. 5 Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them." 6 But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: 9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

What Paul is saying is that there are very sincere people who believe different things about God. He also demonstrates the kind of heart that we should have when it comes to those of different faiths. It is not the people who Paul attacks—he testifies that they are zealous for God. Instead he focuses on their knowledge of God's plan of salvation. Paul clarifies that righteousness does not come from being devout or by following the law (We would call this being a good person)—instead righteousness comes through our faith in God's plan for salvation—namely that Jesus died and was raised from the dead. Ultimately, God's plan for salvation was through the person of Jesus Christ.

So when it comes to salvation, the question always goes back to who is Jesus? Who was he and was his message true? The Muslim will say Jesus was a great prophet of God but he did not die for our sins on the cross and was not raised from the dead. In addition, they would vehemently deny that Jesus is the Son of God. Interestingly, Muslims do affirm the virgin birth of Jesus and that he performed miracles while on earth. But for the devout Muslim, the other parts pertaining to Jesus, is blasphemy. So already the message of Jesus Christ is a huge obstacle. On the other spectrum, the devout Buddhist and Hindu will agree that Christ died for our sins—but they would also say there are many ways to heaven; and with each reincarnation—people get closer to the truth. Initially that sounds appealing because it appears very inclusive to all people, which everyone likes. But if one thinks through the whole issue of reincarnation; the hope is that eventually—after many reincarnations—one will eventually get it right—which affirms that Buddhism and Hinduism also believe there is one way to "the one." Yet there are still major differences between Hinduism and Buddhism—namely Hindus believe there are over three hundred million gods, while and Buddhist do not believe in a personal god.

As you can see there are major differences when it comes to the faiths, and also atheists, no matter how devout people are personal themselves. So one must ask this question: Would God really allow devout people to experience salvation when they view Him so differently; some completely denying Him? Secondly, what do you do with Jesus? The Bible emphatically states he is the Son of God (John 3:16). If this is true, and I realize this is a big *if*, can his ministry be simply dismissed as one of several options to God? In other words, Jesus made some bold claims about himself and he endured the cross in a blood bath. Would God really make Jesus go through all that torment so we could choose Jesus as one of His options? If Jesus is the son of God—if he has been sent by God—doesn't it make sense that God would judge those who reject his message?

If I hypothetically had the ability to be God and send Korban to experience a bloody death the sins of the world, so you could have a relationship with me—and you rejected him—do you honestly think I would accept you because you were devout and believed something different? Not on your life, you rejected my son! Believe it or not—when Christ died on the cross it cost God something emotionally. We tend to use the "devout person argument" because it sounds altruistic—but we seldom ever think of this issue from God's perspective. If Jesus is His son, he paid dearly as His son, and he went through such agony that he believed in his heart that his Father had forsaken him (Matthew 27:46). Imagine hearing your son—whom you love with all your heart believe that you forsook him. Imagine how that phrase would echo and linger in your mind. But in reality—God did not forsake His son according to the Christians—instead He knew that the burden of dying for the sins of the world was so costly he had to allow him to suffer to appease His righteous wrath.

If the message of Jesus is true; wouldn't this make God a hypocrite if He said, "Okay you rejected my son and his message; I tell you what I am going to do—I will let you come up with your own plan to have a relationship with me, just make sure you are sincere." Therefore the question is not whether there are devout followers of other faiths—the question is whether the message of Jesus true? If it is—then like Paul stated, our righteousness comes from believing that he lived a perfect life before God, died for your sins, and was raised again. If the message of Jesus is not true—then it would

make sense for you to try to find your own way, whether it results from being a good person (following the moral law), or adhering to another faith. In the end, it all comes back to your belief in Jesus.

Statement 3: I'm mad at God because of the circumstances in my life

Now if we can be respectful and gentle witnesses for Christ—we might get to the area that is closest to a person's heart. My friend Byron had some very difficult circumstances that ruined his marriage. There is no need to rehash these personal matters, let's just agree that the downfall of his marriage led him to contemplate suicide. During that period Byron prayed that God would salvage his marriage—yet all that happened was that his marriage continued to crumble to the point where there was no longer a pulse left. Byron would conclude later that he was mad at God, which further convinced him there was no God. I suspect we can relate to Byron, for those of us whose marriage went bankrupt! But if not marriage, maybe it was something else, like a long period of unemployment, chemical addictions, the death of a loved one, a tragedy that left you or a loved one paralyzed. The reality is there are times in our life when our world crumbles right before our eyes and there is nothing we can do but cry out to God. Moreover, if He does not answer our pleas; then we feel completely abandoned by Him, like Jesus did on the cross.

So where is God in all of this? How are we to respond in the midst of such personal pain? The reality is that sometimes the best response is no response. Sometimes the best thing we can do is shut up and just be there for them. I have seen people experience death and tragedy and they are very mad at God and have concluded He does not exist. I had a person lose their one month old child and they screamed obscenities at God. This is not the time to argue for God or try to explain the events of their life through a theological grid. Instead you should listen and remind yourself that Jesus felt the same way on the cross. He felt completely abandoned by God. The last thing Jesus needed was for someone to walk up to the cross and say, "Oh Jesus, God is still there, you just don't know it because you are hurting. But you really shouldn't say things like that" No when a person reaches that point of anguish they just need you to be there with them and go through their pain with them. In the middle of a storm you don't stand and reason—you look for shelter. Christians have to understand that we need to be a place of safety for people who are struggling.

Today, Byron has had some years to reflect on his marriage. He has concluded that it was not God's fault if He in fact exists. He recognizes the mistakes he and his wife made. He recognizes that each of us are responsible for our actions. Today, Byron is ready to engage in a discussion if God exists. In the end he is ready because I did not bring up God when he was hurting, instead I listened to him. I hurt for him. I prayed for him. I love Byron; I always will. He is like a brother to me. I just hope that one day we will both share the same love for Christ.