My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains

Martin Thielen

DOUBTER'S PARISH BOOKS PRESENTS

My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains

In this engaging book, Martin Thielen, best-selling author, ex-megachurch pastor, and founder of DoubtersParish.Com shares his story of deconstructing and reconstructing faith. If you struggle with traditional Christian beliefs and institutional religion but still seek a faith/spirituality that makes sense for the twenty-first century, this book was written specifically for you.

“Be merciful to those who doubt”

—Jude 22 NIV

Dedication

To Paula, who has traveled this journey with me for nearly five decades.

To Jonathan, Laura, Anna, and Jack, who bring great joy to my life.

And to the memory of Jim, the best friend I ever had.

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Preface

In August 2023, I posted an article on my website called “My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains.” At the time I worried it would offend people. Never before had I written so transparently about my spiritual journey from traditional to nontraditional faith. However, I believed readers of DoubtersParish.Com would appreciate the story. So I threw caution to the wind and published the article.

It quickly gained an exceptionally large readership. A few hours after posting it, I received the following email:

> *Your story is my story. You’ve put into words what I’ve been thinking and feeling for years. The article deeply moved me and significantly helped me on my spiritual journey. Thank you for your willingness to risk being so transparent, authentic, and vulnerable.*

Over the next few days, I received hundreds of similar responses. Clearly the article struck a nerve. I felt pleased that so many people found it helpful. But the idea of developing the post into a book never entered my mind.

However, a few weeks later, I heard from an old editor friend. He encouraged me to expand the article into a book. He felt readers would identify with my story of faith lost and faith kept and find it relevant for their own journey. That nudge, along with the large readership and heartfelt responses to the article, led me to write this book.

In short, ***My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains*** tells my story of deconstructing and reconstructing faith. If you struggle with traditional Christian beliefs and institutional religion but still seek a faith/spirituality that makes sense for the twenty-first century, this book was written for you. If so, please go to the introduction, and let’s begin.

Martin Thielen, 2024

Introduction

Back in 1972, when I was fifteen, my conservative Southern Baptist church in Muskogee, Oklahoma, tapped me to preach the sermon for the annual youth-led worship service. My cousin Rodger, pianist for the special event, asked me, “What song would you like me to play for the offering, which will occur right before your sermon?”

John Lennon and Jesus

At the time, choosing an offertory song for my first sermon felt like a small decision. But in hindsight, it foreshadowed that my life as a Christian believer and vocational minister would prove complicated. Without thinking about the radical incongruence of the request, I asked for a medley of my two favorite songs at that time: a 1933 hymn called “He Lives” and John Lennon’s newly released song, “Imagine.”

If you are not familiar with the hymn “He Lives,” it confidently affirms that Jesus is alive and well and lives in the hearts of Christian believers. The lyrics promise that Jesus walks with us and talks to us along life’s journey. In this upbeat song of faith, there’s no room for doubt.

The other selection in my offertory request could not have been more radically different. In his famous (many would say infamous) song “Imagine,” John Lennon imagined a world without religion, nations, or possessions. Luckily, no one in that provincial Baptist congregation recognized the heretical song or knew the subversive lyrics. Since the offertory was instrumental rather than vocal, I dodged a bullet.

Minutes before I walked to the pulpit to preach my first sermon, my cousin, already an accomplished pianist at age seventeen, seamlessly wove together “He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today” and “Imagine no religion.” He ended the medley by giving me a big smile.

Although I didn’t know it at the time, that offertory, which vividly combined belief and unbelief, would serve as an apt metaphor for my life, faith, and vocation over the

next fifty years. For most of those decades, I identified as a dedicated believer and a struggling doubter at the same time. And in many ways I still do.

In the thoughts and chapters that follow, I'll share many details and stories about my lifelong struggle with religious doubt and how that spiritual angst finally got resolved. However, in order to tee up that narrative, I need to lay out, in broad strokes, my personal story.

Air Force Brat

During the first fifteen years of my life, my father served as a military pilot for the United States Air Force, making me an "Air Force brat." We lived in eight different states, from California to Maine, along with a stint in Hawaii, where I became an avid surfer.

Other than a handful of visits to military chapels for Christmas Eve and Easter services, I had no contact with institutional religion. As a result, I had only a vague concept of God and no understanding of Christian theology.

Unfortunately, I lived in a severely dysfunctional home, including a deeply strained father-son relationship. And given our nomadic military life, I did not have a stabilizing community network to help offset my troubled homelife. As a result of these unhealthy dynamics, I had no sense of belonging, meaning, or self-esteem. In short, I had a lot of unmet needs to be loved, affirmed, and connected. I felt "lost" in every possible way.

"I Once Was Lost but Now Am Found"

Soon after I turned fifteen, my father, who suffered a major heart attack two years earlier, unexpectedly took early medical retirement. Unprepared for civilian life and uncertain what to do, my parents decided to return to their hometown of Muskogee, Oklahoma.

On my first Sunday in town, my aunt, uncle, and cousin took me to their Southern Baptist church, where I heard, for the first time, a simple message about "accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior." During the invitation, while the

congregation sang “Just as I Am,” I walked down the aisle, took the preacher by the hand, and said, “I want to be saved.”

The following Sunday, as I stood in the baptismal pool, the pastor said, “In obedience to the command of Jesus Christ, and upon your profession of faith in him as your Lord and Savior, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” He then immersed me into the waters of baptism. I had indeed been saved. Nine months later I decided that I wanted to be a preacher, and I set my sights on that goal.

A Carnie, a Student, and a Salesman

Upon graduation from high school, I decided to take a great adventure. I took a job traveling across the country as a carnival worker. That mostly meant working ridiculously long hours under challenging circumstances for extremely low pay and living in an ice cream truck. All of which motivated me to get an education! One of my most vivid memories of that unique experience was speaking at one of the Sunday morning worship services for carnival workers. The small congregation sat in tiny vehicles at the bumper car ride.

That fall I enrolled at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. Students used to joke that the university only had two requirements for graduation—the ability to spell *Ouachita* and *Arkadelphia*. I majored in religion and served as a university-sponsored youth speaker to churches throughout the state. By my junior year I found myself struggling with religious doubt and no longer felt sure about a life in ministry.

Over the next two years, I fell in love, got married, graduated, had a child, and went into the insurance business. I rapidly became one of the top ten new agents of my company in the nation and made a boatload of money.

However, I could not shake my interest in a ministerial vocation. So, with the support of my wife, I made plans to go to seminary. When he heard the news, my father said, “You are a damn fool. You could have been the president of that company. Instead, you’ll waste your life baptizing babies and burying old folks.” Thankfully, he later changed his

tune. And over the years, we eventually found a way to make peace with each other.

Becoming a Baptist Preacher

A few months later my wife and I sold our home, packed all our belongings into a U-Haul truck, loaded up our preschool son, and drove to Louisville, Kentucky, where I attended Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I greatly enjoyed my seminary years and received a high-quality tuition-free theological education, for which I am deeply grateful.

During seminary I served as a chaplain intern at a state mental hospital. My favorite memory from that experience is sitting in the lounge one afternoon watching all the residents enthusiastically sing along with Paul Simon (on the radio), “Still Crazy after All These Years.”

Upon graduation from seminary, I had the good fortune to land a job at a sizable “First Church” county-seat Southern pastorate. It proved a wonderful start to my career in parish ministry. During those years my wife and I happily welcomed a daughter into our family.

A few years later I accepted a call to a larger congregation. During that pastorate I earned a doctor of ministry degree from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, did major research on the topic of worship and preaching, published extensively at my denominal publishing house, and got on the clergy speaking circuit.

In my early thirties I landed a plumb position in Nashville, Tennessee, at the national denominational headquarters for the Southern Baptist Convention. One of my friends called it “The Baptist Vatican.” I served as a worship and preaching editor, author, consultant, teacher, and conference leader. In spite of my growing discomfort with the conservative evangelical theology of my denomination, which was never a good fit for me, I felt well suited for the job, loved doing it, and hoped to stay at “The Baptist Vatican” for a long time.

An Ecclesiastical Takeover

However, during those same years, under the populist banner of defending the Bible and defeating liberalism, a powerful group of ruthless, mean-spirited, hard-core, politically partisan, religious-right extremists took total control of the Southern Baptist Convention. Unwilling to work in that hostile environment, I resigned my denominational position and took a large pastorate in Honolulu, Hawaii. But unfortunately, even in paradise, where I kept a surfboard at my church office and another one at home, I could not escape the relentless drumbeat of religious fundamentalism in my denomination.

In the most painful career decision of my life, I finally came to the realization that I had no future in the Southern Baptist Convention (or the wider evangelical world). So, with the generous support of my wife, son, and daughter, we made another major transition. I resigned my pastorate, we packed up our belongings, and I left the only denomination I had ever known.

Changing Tribes

After leaving Hawaii, my family and I returned to Nashville where I began a PhD program in liturgics and homiletics (worship and preaching for normal people) at Vanderbilt University. During my doctoral studies I taught worship and preaching courses as an adjunct seminary professor. Although I enjoyed teaching, I felt better suited for parish life than an academic career, so I began looking for a pastoral position. However, given my theology, which grew increasingly liberal every year, I needed to find a more progressive denomination.

After investigating half a dozen mainline denominations, my search for a new church home narrowed to either the Episcopal Church or the United Methodist Church. The Episcopal bishop offered to place me in a three-year aspirant program, with no guarantee of a parish after the process ended. The United Methodist bishop offered me a pastoral appointment beginning the next Sunday. It wasn't a difficult decision.

In the twenty-four years that followed, I served churches of various sizes, from a

student pastorate with a few dozen members to a ten-thousand-member megachurch. I also mentored young clergy, spoke at numerous events, and continued to publish lots of books and articles. In many ways, life as a United Methodist minister in a denomination of “open hearts, open minds, and open doors” felt good for a long time.

Dark Night of the Soul

However, as the years rolled along, I felt a growing discomfort deep in my gut. My faith struggles, which I had grappled with since high school, became significantly more pronounced.

For example, I had a hard time affirming traditional Christian doctrines. I found it difficult to recite the Apostles’ Creed. I no longer resonated with historic orthodox theology. The Bible became more problematic. I grew increasingly disillusioned with institutional religion. I lost faith in the providential care of God. Prayer became challenging. Faith felt ambiguous. And, after a brutal pastoral experience at a megachurch, my vocational joy dissipated.

In light of these troubling dynamics, I began harboring serious doubts about the viability of my faith and ministerial career. Although I attempted to downplay these disturbing and threatening thoughts, I knew I was experiencing a significant transition in my spiritual and vocational life. And it felt deeply disconcerting.

A Life-Altering Dream

In the midst of all this troubling uncertainty, I had a vivid and frightening dream. Before that night, I never put much stock into dreams or their meaning. But this dream changed the course of my life.

In my dream, I found myself working at a church. For some bizarre reason, the congregation met on the top of their building, which had a steep-pitched roof. As hard as I tried, I could not keep my balance. Other people navigated the roof without any problem but not me. On multiple occasions I almost fell off the roof. One time I had to grab a tree branch to keep from falling. Another time a member of the congregation

grabbed me before I fell off the edge. Near the end of my dream, I slipped and almost fell to my death but managed to grab the gutter just in time. The dream ended with me hanging onto the gutter for dear life, precariously swinging above the parking lot many stories below.

I woke in a panic. My mind raced, my heart pounded, my emotions stirred, and my body, wet with sweat, felt exhausted. The meaning of the dream was instantly and unequivocally clear: I could no longer keep my balance in church work.

The next morning I called my best friend, who also served as a minister. For years, we commiserated with each other about our mutual loss of traditional faith, our struggles with institutional religion, and the difficult career questions those issues raised. We spent many hours deconstructing and reconstructing our faith, wondering if what remained was enough to sustain our ministerial vocations. I told him all about the dream, its obvious meaning, and everything it had churned up in me. I concluded by saying, “All of my doubts about God, faith, church, and ministry seem to be coming to a head.”

My friend, a professionally trained therapist, mostly listened. But given our close friendship and long history of discussing these issues, he made some final comments. He said, “Martin, your conscious mind has been telling you for a long time that you cannot keep your balance in church work. Now your unconscious mind seems to be telling you the same thing. Not to mention your body (referring to my long-standing career-threatening vocal cord disorder, which had recently flared up again). The only question is, What are you going to do about it?” A few weeks later I initiated the process for early retirement from vocational ministry.

A Pastor to Doubters

After retirement, in a therapeutic effort to make sense of my rapidly changing faith, I wrote a novel about a doubting southern clergyman who lost traditional faith, quit the ministry, and forged a new life and faith beyond the constraints of institutional religion. I titled the novel ***An Inconvenient Loss of Faith***.

After completing the novel, I created a website for religious doubters, seekers, and strugglers called Doubter's Parish. Being a "pastor" for people grappling with faith in the twenty-first century has brought me much fulfillment and joy.

But most importantly, over the past five years, I have finally found resolution for my lifelong struggle with faith, bringing welcome relief and much-needed closure to my intense religious angst. *My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains* tells this story. I hope you find it helpful.

Martin Thielen, 2024

Part 1

My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion

If I had to summarize my religious journey with one Bible verse, I would choose Matthew 28:17: “When they (the early disciples) saw him (the risen Christ), they worshiped him; *but some doubted*” (NIV, emphasis added). For over fifty years, since my affirmation of faith and baptism as a teenager, I have worshipped God and Christ. But like some of the early followers of Jesus, I have also doubted. A lot.

As noted in the introduction, my faith journey began at age fifteen when I walked down the aisle of a Southern Baptist church in Muskogee, Oklahoma, took the preacher by the hand, and said, “I want to be saved.”

For several years after that experience, I believed in God, Christ, and the church without doubts or questions. But that blessed state of certainty did not hold. In the years and decades that followed, I struggled with one doubt after another as I slowly (and often painfully) bid farewell to the following tenets of traditional religion:

- I Lost Faith in a Literal Bible
- I Lost Faith in the Evangelical Church
- I Lost Faith in Traditional Doctrines
- I Lost Faith in the Providence of God
- I Lost Faith in Institutional Religion
- I Lost Faith in a Traditional God
- I Lost Faith in My Ministerial Vocation

That story follows.

Chapter 1

I Lost Faith in a Literal Bible

After my baptism at a conservative evangelical church at the age of fifteen, I did exactly what my church told me to do. I read my Bible every day and took it literally. And what I read deeply troubled me. I discovered that in "Holy Scripture" God condones slavery, commands genocide, oppresses women, tortures unbelievers, causes catastrophes, condemns homosexuals, and engages in many other troubling sub-Christian behaviors.

What Kind of God Would Do These Things?

For example, I was mortified by the story about a man picking up sticks on the Sabbath. In response to this trivial infraction, "The LORD said to Moses, 'The man shall be put to death.' . . . The whole congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as the LORD had commanded" (Num. 15:35–36 NRSV). Although it's been over fifty years since I first read that disturbing story, I still remember wondering, What kind of ethical and loving God would do that?

I felt similar revulsion when I read the story about a group of boys teasing the prophet Elisha for being bald (2 Kings 2). Their punishment? Being violently ripped to shreds and eaten alive by wild bears. Hundreds of other deeply disturbing examples could be given. Still, I faithfully read my Bible every day, cover to cover, concluding with Jesus violently massacring legions of people during end times in the book of Revelation. Even though I was just a teenager and a new Christian, I instinctively knew something wasn't right.

After reading the Bible cover to cover, I talked to my pastor about my struggle. However, he told me that in order to be a Christian, I had to believe in an "inerrant and infallible" Bible. According to him, no room for any other option existed. He quoted the saying to me, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." But it didn't settle it, at least not for me. The summer before departing for college, I wrote in my journal, "If I have to take everything in the Bible literally, I cannot be a Christian, and I certainly cannot be a minister."

The College Professor Who Saved My Faith

Thankfully, I soon discovered that I didn't have to choose between believing in a literal Bible or abandoning my faith. During my freshman year at college, my primary religion professor taught his students that the Bible, while inspired of God, is a human document. He told our class, "People, not God, wrote the Bible. And they wrote it according to the worldview of their time, which was a prescientific world. For example, the biblical writers believed the world was flat and mental illness was caused by demons."

Then my professor did something that changed my life forever. He wrote in bold capital letters on the blackboard, ALTHOUGH WE MUST ALWAYS TAKE THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY, WE DO NOT ALWAYS HAVE TO TAKE IT LITERALLY. That evening I wrote in my journal, "My religion professor saved my faith today."

That journal entry was not an exaggeration. For me, the words "seriously but not literally" felt like the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, and the resurrection of Jesus all rolled into one. I realized, if the Bible doesn't have to be taken literally, then I didn't have to choose between science and faith. I could believe God created the world, but he did so through the process of evolution.

If the Bible doesn't have to be taken literally, I didn't have to believe that God is violent and genocidal. Instead, that was the understanding ancient people had about God before Jesus taught them that God is love.

If the Bible doesn't have to be taken literally, women don't have to be second-class citizens. If the Bible doesn't have to be taken literally, non-Christians are not doomed to hell. If the Bible doesn't have to be taken literally, the hot-button ethical arguments of our day like abortion are not black-and-white, either/or issues, but gray and ambiguous.

This new understanding of the Bible proved absolutely liberating to me. Of course, it also brought me a boatload of trouble. I belonged to a denomination that insisted on a literal view of Scripture, which put me in a difficult position as a pastor and an

impossible position as a denominational worker. It eventually led to my departure from the Southern Baptist Convention. However, I could not have spiritually survived without abandoning this misguided doctrine.

Theological Malpractice

The erroneous claim that everything in the Bible must be taken literally, including all historic and scientific details, is theological malpractice. Telling people they must believe something that intellectual and theological integrity cannot authentically accept only hurts the Christian cause.

Although belief in biblical inerrancy is required by fundamentalist churches like the Southern Baptist Convention, it's not the historic Christian position. In fact, the church survived for over eighteen hundred years without this toxic belief. It first appeared in the late nineteenth century in reaction to modern science (especially the theory of evolution) and modern biblical scholarship (called "the historical-critical method.")

Conservative believers felt threatened by these modern views, so they created the (unbiblical) concept of an "inerrant and infallible" Bible that could not be questioned by modern science or scholarship. Unfortunately, this view of Scripture is overwhelmingly problematic. For example, if everything in the Bible is literal, then:

- The earth is flat.
- Creation took place six thousand years ago.
- The world was created in six, twenty-four-hour days.
- Women are the property of men.
- Slavery is approved by God.
- Polygamy is approved by God.
- In order to win a bet with the devil, God let Satan kill all ten of Job's children.
- God throws raging, jealous, violent fits, killing thousands in the process.
- Eating shellfish is an abomination to God.

- Wearing blended garments (like cotton/polyester) enrages God.
- Menstruating women and handicapped men are not allowed in public worship.
- People who engage in homosexual activity are to be put to death.
- A woman who does not bleed on her wedding night should be stoned to death.
- All governments, even highly oppressive ones, are established by God.
- God approves of genocide and frequently commanded people to practice it.
- Woman are to be silent in church.
- Women are to wear veils in church.
- Women are to be submissive to men.
- People who commit adultery should be stoned to death.
- The penalty for working on the Sabbath is execution.
- Sassy teenagers are to be executed.

The above examples are just a few of the massive problems that come with biblical inerrancy. And this limited list doesn't even include the many inconsistencies found in the pages of Scripture. Literally hundreds of examples of biblical inconsistencies could be given, including conflicting creation stories in the book of Genesis and irreconcilable accounts of the birth and resurrection of Jesus. In short, interpreting everything literally in the Bible is impossible for thinking Christians.

A Monument to Bad Science and Bad Theology

You may have heard about the Ark Encounter, a theme park in Williamson, Kentucky, built around the biblical story of Noah and the ark. The primary attraction is a life-size replica of the ark at 510 feet long, 85 feet wide, and 51 feet high. Unfortunately, the Ark Encounter is a monument to bad science, bad history, bad biblical interpretation, and bad theology.

At its core, the Ark Encounter is rooted in the ideology of biblical inerrancy, including

belief in “young earth” creationism, the untenable view that the earth is only six thousand years old. This view ignores history, denies science, rejects evolution, and insists that the story of Noah and the ark be interpreted literally. These beliefs present insurmountable problems. A few examples follow.

First, no scientific evidence exists that the earth ever experienced a worldwide flood. Believing so requires a rejection of modern geology along with several other branches of science. Also, how is it possible that every living species on the planet (including dinosaurs according to the Ark Encounter) was placed into one boat, even a big one? From a scientific analysis, a literal reading of the story is impossible.

Second, the Genesis flood story is extremely similar to an ancient Babylonian myth that predates the Bible. Even a casual reading of the two stories leads to the inescapable conclusion that the Israelites borrowed the ancient story, adapted it, and retold it according to their purposes.

Third, significant theological challenges exist with this text. If the Noah story literally happened, then God purposely annihilated every living creature on the earth, including innocent children, in a brutal worldwide genocidal flood. This image of God is hard to reconcile with Jesus’s teachings that God loves the world, including human beings—even sinful ones like the prodigal son.

Biblical stories, including ones from the book of Genesis, are full of great insights and truths. But you can believe the truths of the Bible without believing that the earth is flat, that the world is only six thousand years old, that serpents talk to people, or that Noah literally placed two representatives of every living creature on earth into one boat.

The Bible and Homosexuality

I am a big fan of the PBS British series ***Grantchester***. It’s a story about a Church of England priest who also dabbles in detective work. One of the characters is a curate (an assistant to the parish priest) named Leonard, a closeted gay man. When Leonard’s secret came out, his church fired him and revoked his ministerial credentials. In the

midst of all that drama, Leonard's partner told him, "You work for an institution that reviles you."

Tragically, that's often the case. In the evangelical world, gay people truly are reviled. Although the mainline church has been kinder to gay people in recent years, they also have a long history of discrimination against the LGBTQ community. For example, my own UMC has taught (until just recently in 2024) that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings." Massive damage has been inflicted on people over this hostile stance. And it's all rooted in biblical literalism. Many Christians claim that the Bible condemns homosexual behavior and that we must not go against the Bible.

However, it's past time for the church to admit that this issue is not nearly as simple as saying, "For the Bible tells me so." The Bible only has about seven brief passages on homosexuality. We must be extremely careful about using these few isolated verses to condemn all gay people. As we've already seen, the Bible has hundreds of passages affirming slavery, genocide, the death penalty for minor infractions, polygamy, and women's submission. Sadly, this troubling list of "biblical" behavior goes on and on.

Most Christians in the twenty-first century totally ignore all of these passages and for good reason. However, many traditional believers hold fast to a handful of verses discouraging homosexual activity, which were written during an ancient time when people had absolutely no concept of sexual orientation or gender identity. Sadly, many people use these verses to support prejudice against gay people, to discriminate against them both in society and in the church, and to brutally condemn and wound them, all in the name of biblical fidelity.

Rather than cherry-picking a handful of passages against LGBTQ persons, we must look at the big picture of the Bible, which values love, mercy, grace, and justice. And we must especially pay attention to the teaching and example of Jesus, who never said a word about homosexuality but said a lot of about compassion and inclusion. In short, this never-ending vicious assault on LGBTQ people by Christians is yet another example of the overwhelmingly destructive practice of taking everything in the Bible literally.

The Bible On TV

About ten years ago, I watched a television series called ***The Bible***. I should have known trouble awaited when the series began with a warning that said, "The episodes that follow contain numerous depictions of violence which might not be appropriate for children."

Episode 1 began with a beautiful depiction of creation. However, it quickly shifted to the story of Noah's ark, which, as already noted, included God's genocide of all life (plant, animal, and human) on the face of the earth. The first episode also included God's destruction of the entire city of Sodom; God's killing of every firstborn son (and all firstborn cattle) in Egypt; and God's annihilation of Egypt's entire army by drowning them in the Red Sea, even though they were only obeying Pharoah's orders.

Additional episodes didn't get any better. The biblical stories they depicted represented God as an insecure and violent killing machine who wiped out anyone who violated his arbitrary rules. And the supernatural biblical events they depicted were wholly unbelievable.

After several episodes I finally stopped watching. I wrote in my journal, "If I had to believe these biblical stories literally occurred, I could not be a Christian. This is not the God I know and believe in. Nor is it the God of Jesus. Instead, these stories present an image of a jealous, petty, vindictive, bloodthirsty, monstrous, terrorist Deity who throws violent temper tantrums and wipes out tons of people in the process." I concluded the journal entry by asking, "How in the world can people be biblical literalists? It makes no sense at all."

"I Take the Bible Far Too Seriously to Take It Literally"

Other than affirming faith in Jesus, jettisoning belief in a literal Bible is the best thing I ever did in my spiritual life. Rejecting biblical literalism saved my faith and allowed me to serve as a minister.

With the help of my college professor, along with biblical studies in seminary and

beyond, I came to realize that Scripture is not a magical “inerrant” book dropped from heaven. Instead, the Bible (and its extremely complicated compilation, recording, editing, and canonization) is a fully human document with all the scientific, cultural, ethical, and theological limitations of its ancient time frame.

This crucial insight allows me (and millions of others) to appreciate the beauty of Scripture while avoiding the destructive results of scriptural literalism. And since Christians worship God rather than a human book about God, nothing is lost by rejecting biblical inerrancy. Instead, much is gained, including ethical, intellectual, and theological integrity.

As the famous twentieth-century theologian Karl Bart once said, “I take the Bible far too seriously to take it literally.”

Chapter 2

I Lost Faith in the Evangelical Church

Many years ago, I served as an adjunct professor of worship and preaching at a Baptist seminary. One day, as I prepared for an upcoming class, I went to a photocopy shop and began copying worship bulletins and sermons to give to my students.

An employee at the shop noticed the photocopied materials and asked me, “Are you a minister?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

He said, “Are you a Southern Baptist minister?”

“No,” I said, “but I used to be. I’ve recently joined the United Methodist Church.”

He looked at me for a moment with suspicious eyes and asked, “Are you divorced or are you gay?”

“Neither one,” I replied.

He said, “Then why did you change denominations?”

I’ve been asked that question many times over the years. The short answer is that I lost faith in the evangelical church. To that subject I’ll now turn.

Early Doubts

In preparation for writing this book, I read all my old journals from high school to the present. The journals reminded me that I harbored doubts about the evangelical church from the beginning. For example, as noted in the previous chapter, even as a sixteen-year-old, I found it impossible to believe in biblical literalism. As I’ll share in the next chapter, I also had early doubts about other evangelical beliefs, including the doctrine

of hell. These high school doubts only compounded at college and seminary.

During my college years I served as president of the Baptist Student Union. I also served as the university sponsored “Contact Team” student speaker. In those two roles I visited large numbers of Baptist churches. As I went from one congregation to another, I felt a growing discomfort with many aspects of evangelical life, including endless revival meetings, emotional altar calls, a lack of female clergy, an obsession with “soul winning,” a dearth of social consciousness, inordinate speculation on end times, an anti-academic bias, a judgmental spirit, and hard-core fundamentalist theology. During my junior year in college, I wrote in my journal, “The hard truth is that the Baptist church may not be a good match for me.”

These concerns about denominational affiliation intensified during my studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, although not because of my studies. At the time, SBTS was a highly respected, top-drawer, theologically centrist institution. I received an excellent education there, for which I am still grateful. However, during my seminary tenure in the early 1980s, the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention was in full swing. The resulting angst on campus was palpable. Professors felt anxious and vulnerable. And progressive students like me worried about our futures. Near the end of my studies, I wrote in my journal, “If the fundamentalists win this war, I will have no future in the SBC.” Sadly, that proved prophetic.

Feeling out of Place

Upon graduation from seminary, I landed an excellent pastoral position at a good-sized county-seat church in Arkansas. In spite of my youth and inexperience, the congregation generously loved and supported me. I thrived in that setting, both personally and professionally, along with the church, which experienced significant growth during my tenure. However, in spite of the many positives, I continued to wonder if I was a good fit for the Baptist church.

For example, in my youthful idealism, I believed churches should serve as the social conscience of their community. I had high (although naïve) hopes that my church and denomination would enthusiastically embrace the spirit of the Social Gospel.

Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that the vast majority of evangelicals did not share that enthusiasm.

When I led a Sunday night session on the subject of "War and the Christian," including an overview of pacifism and the Just War Theory, one of our members complained that I wasn't preaching the Bible. He called me "a liberal in conservative clothing."

A few months later I spoke at a denominational meeting about the church's responsibility to care for God's creation. It wasn't well received. After the session concluded, numerous clergymen accosted me and told me in no uncertain terms that "God doesn't care about saving trees. God only cares about saving souls." That evening I wrote in my journal, "I'm not like the other pastors around here. I don't speak the same language they do. Sometimes I feel like an alien from another planet. I wonder if I can survive in this environment over the long haul."

At my next denominational gathering, a national leader of The Moral Majority spoke. His extreme ideology and rabid partisanship deeply troubled me. I wrote in my journal, "Jerry Falwell and The Moral Majority have adopted a far-right conservative platform and baptized it as *the* Christian stance. Ironically, their vision of the church violates virtually all of the teachings of Jesus. If this dangerous movement takes hold in the Southern Baptist Convention, I'm dead meat." Unfortunately, within a few years, that concern became a reality.

Other warning signs about my viability in the Baptist church continued to surface. For example, when I wanted the church to hire a female associate pastor, one of our most conservative members (a former Baptist preacher) went ballistic. He told the deacons, "It's obvious Pastor Martin doesn't believe in biblical inerrancy because he rejects the clear teachings of Scripture against female ministers." He also accused me of practicing "open Communion," which violated the rules of the Arkansas Baptist Convention. And he was correct. I did welcome all to Christ's table, in spite of the misguided rule against it. He also complained that I "didn't give enough altar calls, never preached on hell, didn't schedule enough revivals meetings, wasn't a soul winner, and was too liberal to be a Baptist preacher."

Thankfully, these kinds of criticisms rarely occurred during my first pastorate. And even when they did, they didn't seem to make much of a dent in my strong support among the congregation. However, these early experiences raised growing doubts in my mind about my place in the evangelical world.

Those doubts grew exponentially during my second pastorate. For example, when my church hosted a community-wide Thanksgiving service, I invited black churches along with the white ones. Several leaders of my congregation vehemently protested. A group of them came to my office and demanded that I disinvite them. Although I refused to do so, I paid a steep price for the decision. That troubling interaction, along with many others, opened my eyes to the deep wells of racial prejudice that exist in many Southern evangelical churches. Although racism among churchgoers isn't unique to Southern conservatives, the history and culture of evangelicalism provides a fertile breeding ground for it.

Given these kinds of disconcerting experiences, I increasingly felt out of place in the Baptist church and in the larger evangelical community. As my doctor of ministry advisor wrote in his final evaluation of my doctoral work, "Martin is out of step with mainstream Baptist life." He wasn't wrong. And the worst was yet to come.

The Baptist Vatican

In spite of my denominational doubts, I grew more and more embedded within the Baptist ecosystem. I pastored large-steeple churches, earned a doctoral degree at a Baptist seminary, served on the boards of numerous Baptist institutions, published large numbers of articles and books at the Baptist publishing house, and was a regular speaker in Baptist circles. All of which landed me a job at a young age at denominational headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee—what my friends called "the Baptist Vatican."

For four years, I served the SBC as a national worship and preaching editor, author, consultant, conference leader, and teacher. I absolutely loved the job and hoped to stay long term. But the drumbeat of fundamentalism was impossible to ignore. As I wrote in my journal, "I finally got my dream job, and the fundamentalists are threatening it."

It's difficult to adequately describe my experience in denominational work. On the one hand, I consistently felt overwhelming vocational joy. I produced helpful magazines and books for clergy and lay leaders, traveled all over the country leading workshops, wrote extensively, and enjoyed meaningful friendships with colleagues. About one year into the work, I wrote in my journal, "This is the best job I've ever had in my life. I absolutely love it, am well suited for it, and am told that I excel at it."

On the other hand, I had a front-row seat to the ruthless fundamentalist movement that seemed hell-bent on destroying the SBC, all in the name of defending the Bible from liberalism. Every institution was under attack. For example, numerous seminary professors were either forced out, directly fired, or resigned in protest, including a mass faculty resignation at the seminary I had attended. According to my journal it represented "the last flush of the toilet at a once great seminary."

The editors at Baptist Press were canned for reporting accurate news the fundamentalists didn't want published. The president of the Foreign Mission Board also went down, along with several seminary presidents. The fundamentalist purge of so-called "liberals" became a major bloodbath. And the architects of the movement were just getting started. As one major denominational player told me, "The SBC as we knew it is irretrievably gone."

The institution I worked for (the Baptist Sunday School Board) was not spared. Rumors surfaced that the trustees planned to get rid of our president, making everyone nervous. Editors, including me, were pressured to use fundamentalist writers. The director of my department informed me that several trustees complained to him that my magazine "was not conservative enough." We learned from a reliable inside source that the fundamentalists had a "hit list" of editors they planned to fire, and I wondered if I was on it.

When the trustees gathered to terminate our president on trumped-up charges of being liberal, I, along with many other employees, attended the meeting. Fundamentalist board members launched vicious and untrue accusations against this kind and capable man who had given his life to faithful denominational service. After forcing him to

take early retirement, the trustee chair had the gall to say, “God’s will has been done tonight.” A collective groan from employees filled the room. He then invited everyone to kneel in prayer. Many employees in attendance, including me, walked out in disgust.

Later that year a right-wing extremist was installed as the new president. Key leaders of the fundamentalist movement spoke at the event. The choir from a hard-core religious right church sang. During the service the newly installed president said, “Biblical inerrancy is the track we are now on.” After the ceremony concluded, my best friend looked at me, tears of grief rolling down his face. He said, “We better prepare our resumes.”

The next morning, I told my supervisor that I saw no future in denominational work. I informed him that I would begin looking for a good pastorate right away. Then, in an extremely emotional moment, I said, “I absolutely hate leaving a job that I love so much.” He said, “The job is gone, Martin. The fundamentalists took it away.”

The Final Goodbye

Several months later I resigned from “the Baptist Vatican” and accepted a large Baptist pastorate in Honolulu. However, my days as an evangelical were numbered. For example, when I preached a sermon on environmental stewardship called “Tending God’s Garden,” about half a dozen members angrily walked out of the sanctuary. The next week I received several scathing letters accusing me of “preaching on social issues rather than preaching the gospel.”

One Sunday, after preaching on the subject of religious doubt, our drummer quit on the spot, telling me, “You are a liberal, and you don’t preach the word.” A few months later, during Vacation Bible School, the director asked me why I hadn’t scheduled an evangelistic service for the children, as the denominational curriculum recommended. I told her, “Because I don’t think young children need to be saved.” She wasn’t happy with that response.

After our mostly moderate congregation ordained a woman minister, several Baptist pastors in the state began treating me like the Antichrist. And when news broke that

one of our staff members (who pastored our satellite congregation) was gay, I had to immediately fire him. Under no circumstance could a Southern Baptist church, even a moderate one, retain an openly homosexual pastor. The experience broke my heart. Although my position on homosexuality was still evolving at that time, I knew the hard-line Baptist position against gay people was unjust, and I didn't want to be part of that discrimination anymore.

Near the end of my tenure in Hawaii, I received an offer to serve as a preaching and worship consultant at a Baptist state convention. I also received a job offer to be the editor of the Baptist newspaper at another state convention. In the prefundamentalist takeover of the SBC, I would have jumped at either opportunity. But given the new realities, those options were no longer viable. As I wrote in my journal, "The fundamentalist takeover murdered my career."

Although I still enjoyed surfing the waves at Waikiki beach, back on the mainland, the fundamentalist demolition of the SBC continued unabated. A cruel, arrogant, partisan, and toxic distortion of Christianity now controlled the denomination. There would be no going back.

A few weeks before resigning my Honolulu pastorate, my wife said to me, "I'm sorry for all the pain you are going through. But I'm ready to put this SBC drama behind us and move forward with our lives." After twenty-four years as a Baptist, including twelve years as a full-time ordained minister, it was time for me to say goodbye to the Southern Baptist Convention.

No Second Thoughts

Although leaving the evangelical church proved extraordinarily painful and costly, I've never regretted doing so. As my good friend (a former SBC music minister) likes to say, always with a mischievous smile and in a playful spirit of hyperbole, "I'd rather eat glass than return to the Baptist church."

Although my friend appreciates many things about her evangelical heritage, she's glad to be out. I concur with her assessment. Since departing the Southern Baptist

Convention in the mid-1990s, my decision to leave has been reconfirmed over and over again. Sadly, as bad as things were back then, they have gotten exponentially worse.

For example, several years after I left the SBC, they changed their statement of faith. They now insist that women must "graciously submit" to their husbands. During their annual meetings in 2023 and 2024, they kicked out several churches, including one of their largest ones, for having women ministers on staff. And in recent years we learned that the Executive Committee of the SBC ignored and then covered up large numbers of clergy sexual abuse cases.

The SBC has also doubled down on biblical inerrancy. During a debate about women in ministry, a key Baptist leader claimed that "God cannot call a woman to preach because God is bound by Scripture, which forbids woman preachers." This extreme position that the eternal Spirit of the universe is "bound by Scripture" (written by flawed mortals thousands of years ago with archaic worldviews) is a vivid case of bibliolatry, where one worships the Bible rather than God.

Since my departure, the SBC has become even more partisan than it was before. For example, one Baptist leader recently said, "It's virtually impossible to be both a Democrat and a Christian. I don't think it can be done." As a Christian and a Democrat, I find that statement highly offensive.

Of course, these sorts of problems don't just exist in the Southern Baptist Convention. We see the same dynamics playing out in the larger evangelical world. For example, in recent years, evangelicals have aggressively stepped up their hostility against the LGBTQ community. At a recent evangelical anti-LBGTQ rally, a hateful and angry participant held up a large sign that said "LGBT = Let God Burn Them."

During the pandemic, large numbers of evangelicals refused to pause in-person worship services, and many of them challenged the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. Increasingly, the evangelical world shares anti-science conspiracy theories from its pulpits and social media posts, making the world a more dangerous place.

The worst failure of the evangelical church in recent years is their overwhelming and unyielding support of Donald Trump, who violates every value they claim to hold including character, decency, marital fidelity, truth telling, family values, Christian piety, dedication to Christ, and the preservation of democracy. For some frightening reason, evangelicals love his hate. For me, this almost cultlike adulation of the most anti-Jesus president in American history became the final straw in the collapse of evangelical credibility.

For example, many of the same evangelical leaders who ferociously condemned Bill Clinton for his sexual indiscretions fiercely defended Donald Trump for far worse sexual behavior, including bragging about grabbing women by their genitals, paying off a porn star for her silence, and being found civilly liable by a jury of his peers for committing sexual assault. The hypocrisy is staggering. Not only have evangelicals trashed their own brand, but they have also done irreparable damage to the entire Christian witness, including turning away millions of people, especially young ones, from the Christian faith.

I believe evangelical support of Donald Trump will go down as one of the worst failures in American church history. And lest you think these comments are political, I can assure you they have nothing to do with partisan politics and everything to do with Christian ethics.

Unfortunately, many more examples of evangelical failures could be mentioned, including demonization of immigrants, prejudice against Muslims, the fostering of white Christian nationalism, support for authoritarianism leadership, a willful disregard of Jesus's example and teachings, and an overall spirit of anger, fear, negativity, and self-righteous judgmentalism.

In short, evangelicalism has become a highly negative force, doing great damage to the Christian faith, the American church, and the common good of humanity. In the words of Obery Hendricks Jr., evangelical faith in America has devolved into "Christians against Christianity."

However, that doesn't mean I think all evangelicals are bad. I don't. And it doesn't mean I don't appreciate my evangelical heritage. I do, as a future chapter will attest. But that doesn't change the fact that the evangelical Church in America lost its way a long time ago.

Which is why, in the summer of 1994, I sold my surfboards, resigned my Southern Baptist pastorate in Honolulu, and left the evangelical world forever.

[For further reflections about losing faith in the evangelical church, see *Why I Left Conservative Evangelicalism*, *The Toxic Evangelical Variant*, *Providing an Alternative to Toxic Religion*, *The Antidote to Mean Christianity*, *My Last Visit to a Southern Baptist Church*, *Pro-Life?*, and *How the Religious Right Gets It Wrong and What to Do about It*.]

Chapter 3

I Lost Faith in Traditional Doctrines

I recently received an angry email from an unhappy reader of my local newspaper. He took exception to my column about conservative Christianity's mean-spirited harassment of the LBGTQ community. Among other things he said, "You are a heretic, and you will burn in agony forever in a devil's hell." This is nothing new. A lot of evangelicals in my extremely red town dislike my progressive articles on the religion page. I hear from folks all the time who, like this man, think I'm a hell-bound heretic.

I both agree and disagree with this assessment. I disagree with the assertion that I will burn forever in hell, as I 'll explain in a moment. But I agree that I am somewhat of a heretic, which Google defines as "a person who differs in opinion from established religious dogma." According to that definition, I qualify as a heretic and almost always have. From my earliest years as a Christian, I have been unable to believe a large number of traditional doctrines. Which brings me back to the subject of hell.

Losing Faith in Hell

One year after my affirmation of faith and baptism, several of my youth group friends and I attended a revival meeting at a sister congregation. That's where I heard my first "hellfire and damnation" sermon.

The evangelist preached from the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Instead of preaching on the point of the parable—compassion for the poor and marginalized—he focused on eternal torment in hell. For nearly an hour, he spoke about the horrific eternal fiery punishment that awaited everyone who failed to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

He concluded with an extended story about a man who got trapped in his car during an automobile accident. Before first responders could free him from the wreckage, his car caught on fire, and he died screaming in unbearable agony as the flames engulfed him. That fate, the preacher said, awaits all people who die without faith in Jesus. The

difference is that their pain will be eternal, not temporal.

As we drove home from the revival meeting, I discovered that my friends, like me, felt deeply disturbed by the sermon. However, their concerns proved wildly different from mine. They worried about the eternal destiny of their lost friends and strategized ways to save them from the flames of hell. I, on the other hand, felt traumatized over the idea of a cruel, vengeful, vile, psychopathic, and sadistic God who eternally tortured people for holding erroneous doctrines about Jesus. Even at age sixteen, I knew I could not love and serve such a violent and vicious God. So, rather than rejecting my faith, I rejected belief in a literal hell. And while that theological instinct was based on youthful visceral emotion, it has stood the test of time, debate, theological reflection, and biblical scholarship.

Losing Faith in Exclusive Salvation

Not only did I doubt the doctrine of hell; I also questioned the concept of exclusive salvation, the belief that a person can only be saved by faith in the historical Jesus. For example, I vividly remember a Sunday school class lesson I attended during high school. A missionary from another country was speaking. He told us it was imperative that we send more missionaries around the world because people who did not accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior were lost and had no hope of salvation in this life or the next.

I asked the missionary, “What about people who’ve never heard of Christ?”

He said, “They will die, lost in their sins, and spend eternity separated from God in a devil’s hell.”

I said, “You’re kidding.”

But he wasn’t kidding. And while I didn’t challenge him, I didn’t buy it.

A History of Heresy

This kind of "heresy" continued throughout my years in the Southern Baptist Convention. I disagreed with their "established religious dogma" all the time. As already noted in chapter 1, I didn't believe in a literal Bible. As mentioned above, I didn't believe in hell or exclusive salvation. And this list of heretical beliefs went on and on.

For example, I didn't believe in a literal six-day creation. I didn't believe the earth was only six thousand years old. I didn't believe women should submit to men. I didn't believe women couldn't serve as ministers. I didn't believe in the "rapture." I didn't believe Democrats could not be Christians. I didn't believe abortion was a black-and-white issue. And I didn't believe homosexuals were an abomination to God. It's a wonder I lasted as long as I did in the Baptist church.

Although leaving the Southern Baptist Convention and joining the United Methodist Church made me less of a heretic, it didn't remove all of my heretical tendencies. Even in the mainline tradition I constantly struggled with "established religious dogma." For example, I had serious doubts about the virgin birth, the ascension, supernatural miracles, God's providential care, the second coming, rejection of same-sex relationships, and a host of other traditional beliefs, including the doctrine of substitutionary blood atonement, as the following story explains.

Losing Faith in Blood Atonement

About ten years after I became a United Methodist minister, during a combined Holy Thursday/Good Friday worship service, I told a true story from the Holocaust. The story involved a Polish army sergeant named Franciszek Gajowniczek and a Franciscan priest named Maximilian Kolbe.

In February 1941, the Nazis incarcerated Maximilian Kolbe at Auschwitz. In spite of the brutality of the infamous concentration camp, Father Kolbe lived out the spirit of Jesus. He shared his food, gave up his bunk, and prayed for his captors. He soon earned the nickname "the Saint of Auschwitz."

In July of that same year, a prisoner escaped from the camp. The policy at Auschwitz was to kill ten prisoners for every one who escaped. The next morning, guards gathered the prisoners into the courtyard. The commander randomly selected ten names from the roll book. Everyone knew if they heard their name called it meant a death sentence.

The commander began calling the ten names. At each selection another prisoner stepped forward to fill the sinister quota. The tenth name called was Franciszek Gajowniczek. Upon hearing his name, the condemned Gajowniczek began to sob. “My wife and my children,” he wept.

The guards heard movement among the prisoners. They raised their rifles. The dogs tensed, anticipating a command to attack. A prisoner pushed his way to the front. It was the priest, Maximilian Kolbe. He showed no fear on his face, no hesitancy in his step. The guard shouted at him to stop or be shot. “I want to talk to the commander,” he said calmly. Father Kolbe stopped a few paces from the commander, removed his hat, and looked the German officer in the eye.

“Herr Commandant, I wish to make a request. I want to die in the place of this prisoner.” He then pointed at the sobbing Gajowniczek. “I have no wife and children. Besides, I am old and not good for anything. He’s in better condition.” “Who are you?” the officer asked. “A Catholic priest.” The entire crowd was stunned; the commandant, uncharacteristically speechless. After a moment, he barked, “Request granted.”

Franciszek Gajowniczek later said, “Prisoners were never allowed to speak. So I could only thank him with my eyes. I could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it. I, the condemned, was to live; and someone else willingly and voluntarily offered up his life for me, a complete stranger.”

Gajowniczek survived the Holocaust. After the war he made his way back to his hometown in Poland. In his backyard he placed a plaque, one he carved with his own hands. The plague reads, “A tribute to Maximillian Kolbe—the man who died so I could live.”[1]

After the story I briefly compared Maximillian Kolbe's sacrifice to Jesus's death on the cross. "Like the priest," I said, "Jesus died in our place, to pay the price for our sin." We sang the old hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Then we observed Holy Communion. Although the service went well, I felt uncomfortable.

After the service I went to my office to put away my clerical robe. Although I didn't fully understand why, my feelings of discomfort grew in intensity. I sat at my desk and reviewed the worship service in my mind, especially the story about the priest. It seemed a fitting metaphor of Christ's sacrificial atoning death on our behalf. But still something felt wrong. The story nagged at me. For years I had quietly struggled with atonement theology—the belief that Jesus died in our place to pay the punishment for our sins. But mostly I ignored my reservations. After all, substitutionary blood atonement stood at the core of Christian orthodoxy, at least in my religious tradition. Who was I to question it? But tonight the struggle came to a head.

Still sitting at my desk, I again mulled over the Holocaust priest story. I asked myself, "In this metaphor, who is the God figure?" God was not represented by the loving priest. Instead, Maximillian Kolbe represented Jesus, who lovingly and willingly gave up his life. So I asked myself again, "Where is God in this story?" And then, in a chilling moment of horrifying awareness, I realized who the God figure actually was.

In my metaphorical usage of this story, *God the Father was represented by the Nazi commander at Auschwitz who demanded blood, suffering, and death for behavior he deemed unacceptable.* That realization stunned me. I finally realized that behind the all-pervasive theology, liturgies, prayers, songs, and hymns of Christendom that Jesus "died for our sins" stood a bloodthirsty, wrathful, and vengeful deity who required a pound of flesh to pay the price for human sin.

That, of course, is the exact opposite of the spirit of Jesus. As the Roman soldiers brutally executed him on the cross, he didn't pray, "Father, avenge me." Instead, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them." As I pondered this truth, I wondered, *How can this disturbing image of a vindictive God be reconciled with Jesus's belief in an all-loving, all-merciful, and all-forgiving God?* The answer was stunningly clear. It can't.

That's the night I stopped believing in substitutionary blood atonement. That's the night I decided to never again sing, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins; / And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains." That's the night I rejected substitutionary atonement theology once and for all.

It's No Fun Being a Heretic

Several years ago I wrote an article challenging the doctrine of blood atonement which featured the above Holocaust story. I titled the article "The Night I Stopped Believing in Substitutionary Blood Atonement." The article argued that while the metaphor of blood atonement made sense to an ancient world that practiced animal sacrifice, it's theologically offensive in the modern era to think God required a bloody sacrifice of his Son in order to forgive humanity. I claimed that blood atonement was divine child abuse, not divine justice or love. I asked my readers, "How can we love, worship, and serve such a violent, ruthless, and vengeful God?" In short, I made the case that it's past time for twenty-first-century Christians to reject this crude and barbaric theology.

The article didn't go over well with a lot of people. In fact, a conservative group in the United Methodist Church used the article as an example of the growing heresy in the denomination. I received angry emails from conservative Methodists demanding that I recant my heresy. But I couldn't and wouldn't do it. Instead, I stood by the article.

I don't enjoy being a heretic. Quite the opposite. My doubts about "established religious dogma" have caused me enormous pain over the years, both personally and professionally. I don't choose to have so many doubts, and I wish I didn't. It just seems to be the way I'm wired. For some reason, I see religious beliefs through the eyes of nonreligious people. And when seen from that perspective, a lot of "established religious dogma" looks strange indeed.

For example, conservative evangelical Christian turned atheist Seth Andrews once described the Christian religion as "stories about an ancient superbaby conceived via ghost sex and born of a virgin for the purpose of blood magic to rescue humanity from a torture chamber that God, himself, created." Although that quote would likely offend most Christians, including me, I can empathize with his skepticism. From the beginning

of my Christian journey until today, I have doubted traditional doctrines and religious institutions. I guess that's why my three favorite passages of Scripture are:

- "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24 NKJV)!
- "But some doubted" (Matt 28:17 NIV).
- "Be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22 NIV).

Unfortunately, about five years ago, my heretical tendencies became intolerable. Instead of doubting secondary Chrisian doctrines like hell and blood atonement, I found myself struggling with some of the core (many would say essential) tenants of historical orthodox Christianity. These included belief in a personal, supernatural, theistic God and a divine Christ, which will be discussed later in this book.

These relentless heretical doubts about core traditional doctrines finally came to a climax that prematurely ended my ministerial career. In the introduction of this book, I told you about a life-changing dream that forced me to admit I could no longer keep my balance in church work. What I didn't mention is what happened two days later.

19 Percent Christian

The dream about the church with the steep-pitched roof (as told in the introduction) occurred on a Wednesday night. The next day, on Thursday morning, I talked to my best friend about the dream. As already noted, at the end of our conversation, he asked me the difficult question, "What are you going to do about it?" The next day, Friday, was my day off, so I took the opportunity to do some serious theological, spiritual, and vocational soul-searching.

I went to my study, pulled out a legal pad, and wrote down the words to the ancient Apostles' Creed, which Christians often recite in public worship services. Many Christians believe this historic fourth-century creed contains the core nonnegotiable tenants of Christianity. I had planned to engage in this theological exercise for months, but I kept delaying, fearful of the results. But that day, after my dream and the conversation with my best friend, I finally drummed up the courage to do so. I carefully

divided the ancient words into the following twenty-one faith affirmations:

1. I believe in God
2. The Father
3. Almighty
4. Maker of heaven and earth
5. And in Jesus
6. Christ
7. His only Son
8. Our Lord
9. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
10. Born of the Virgin Mary
11. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried
12. The third day he rose from the dead
13. He ascended into heaven
14. And sitteth at the hand of God the Father Almighty
15. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead
16. I believe in the Holy Spirit
17. The holy catholic church
18. The communion of saints
19. The forgiveness of sins
20. The resurrection of the body
21. And the life everlasting

Looking carefully at the twenty-one statements, I asked myself, “Which of these

theological affirmations do I really believe? I wrote “maybe” on several of them. But then, frustrated by my wishy-washy responses, I finally decided that, for the purpose of this exercise, “maybe” did not count. The pressing question today was, Which of these theological affirmations do I believe without any significant reservations or doubts?

After years of struggle, doubt, and denial, ruthless honesty finally prevailed. The hard truth is that I only fully believed four of the twenty-one theological affirmations. I pulled out my calculator and divided four by twenty-one. According to historic creedal Christianity, I was 19 percent Christian—20 percent if I rounded it up.

I sat silent at my desk for a long time. A deep sadness fell over me. I knew my days as a minister of the gospel were over.

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[1] Max Lucado, Six Hours One Friday (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), 66–68.

[For further reflections about losing faith in traditional doctrines, see *On Losing and Keeping Faith*, *The Benefit of the Doubt*, and *It’s (Past) Time to Raze Hell*.]

Chapter 4

I Lost Faith in the Providence of God

Providence
Noun: the protective care of God
"They found their trust in divine providence to be a source of comfort."
—*Google Dictionary*

In the spring of 2020, early in the Covid pandemic, most United Methodist churches temporarily suspended in-person worship services. On the first Sunday of the suspension, I decided to worship online with a large, out-of-state United Methodist congregation. After setting up my laptop to watch the service, I realized I had fifteen minutes to spare. So I picked up the TV remote and clicked on CNN.

Providence and the Pandemic

At the time, Covid was ravaging the state of New York, especially New York City. CNN projected the current death count on the screen, which rose dramatically by the hour. The segment I watched featured a NYC hospital in chaos. The ER and ICU overflowed with people struggling with Covid. Things had gotten so bad that the hospital had to bring in a refrigerated storage unit to house dead bodies because their morgue had run out of room.

As I watched the horrific pandemic news on CNN, I realized it was time for the online worship service to begin. So I turned on my laptop. For a few minutes, the two events overlapped. On my television, CNN continued reporting on the Covid tragedy. On my laptop, the church began singing its opening praise song.

I don't remember the specific song they sang, but it was based on Psalm 121, which affirms God's providential love, care, and protection. In this text, the psalmist promises the people of God, "The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life." (vv. 6–7 NIV).

For several minutes, I flipped back and forth between the live broadcasts. I muted the television and listened to the online praise band leading a song about God's protecting us from all harm. Then I muted the online service and listened to CNN report on the devastating carnage of Covid. Finally, the cognitive dissonance between what I saw on the television monitor and the computer screen became more than I could bear. So I turned off both the TV and the laptop. And then I began to cry. I cried for all the people suffering and dying from Covid. I also cried over my long-lost faith in the providential care of God, which I knew was never going to return.

Bipolar Theology

From the beginning of my Christian journey, I attempted to believe in the providence of God. I *wanted* to believe in it. I *needed* to believe in it. But I also had my doubts. For example, when I was sixteen, my friend's mother was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. When she told me the frightening news, I confidently told her, "The Lord has a reason and purpose for everything. God will defeat this cancer. He will not abandon your mom or your family."

That evening I wrote about the bad news in my journal, including my unquestioning affirmation of faith in God's providential care. But in a moment of spiritual transparency, I added, "Sometimes it's hard to believe this, even for the strongest Christian." Unfortunately, those doubts proved justified. Less than a year later, my friend's mother died from her cancer.

For decades, I lived in a kind of bipolar theological quandary concerning the providence of God. Part of me believed in God's protective care. Part of me wasn't sure. But over time, my doubts began gaining the upper hand, as you can see in the following journal excerpts.

Notes from a Pastor's Journal

When a fifty-one-year-old man in my community was killed by a falling tree branch on his farm, I heard people say things like "God took him home," "God must have had a purpose," or "God works in mysterious ways." I wrote in my journal, "I don't believe

God had anything to do with this man's death. I think he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

When a businessman in my church claimed that God saved his business from a fire, I wrote in my journal, "I wonder why God didn't save the business next door to his?"

When farmers in my agricultural community asked me to pray for rain, I wrote in my journal, "I know a little bit about science. Weather patterns, not acts of God, cause rain. I'm their pastor so I'll pray for rain. But it troubles me to do so."

When a church member's wife died at the of age forty-eight, he said to me, "I guess the man upstairs knows what he is doing." I wrote in my journal, "Does the 'man upstairs' really kill off forty-eight-year-old women? If so, he's not doing a very good job."

When I read a news story about a two-year-old girl attacked and killed by an alligator in Florida, I wrote, "You would think a powerful and loving God could create a kinder creation."

After watching a nature show on public television, I wrote, "The show featured a story about beautiful red crabs. As soon as they hatch, their instincts tell them to head to the beach and the safety of the water. But, as they move that direction, aggressive ants attack them and eat their eyeballs so they cannot see which direction to go. Then the ants eat their brains and other soft tissue, leaving thousands of dead crabs in their wake. Why would a loving, providential God create such carnage? And this is just one microscopic example of the overwhelming brutality of nature. It hardly fits with the hymn, 'This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought, of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; his hand the wonders wrought.'"

When an eighteen-year-old boy in my congregation (whom I deeply loved) died in a car wreck the day before he was scheduled to start college, I wrote in my journal. "People are saying it must have been God's will. But that is theological pornography. If this is God's will, then God is a sadist, unworthy of our love and worship."

After visiting a woman in my church suffering from unbearable pain, I wrote, “There are days when it’s hard to believe in God. Today is one of them. I went to see Mrs. Williams this afternoon, who is dying from inoperable cancer. During my visit she cried out, over and over again, for God to let her die. To me, the Christian thing to do would be to put this poor woman out of her misery. But people say that is ‘playing God.’ However, since God isn’t playing God, then maybe we should. For years, I’ve worried about my messed up vocal cords holding out until retirement. Maybe I need to worry more about my faith holding out.”

When a close friend of mine was killed in a horrific car wreck, along with his wife and two young children, I wrote, “It wouldn’t have taken much to prevent this disaster. Just a few seconds of the truck driver’s foot on his brake before he slammed into them. That’s all it would take. Surely an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God could pull off something as simple as that. You would think so. But you would be wrong. In this case, dead wrong. Times four.”

While reading over my journals in preparation for this book, a familiar pattern surfaced. I would write down an example of suffering and then ask, “Where is God?” For example, in 2004, when 230,000 people died in a massive tsunami in Asia, I asked, “Where is God?” Or when I read a story about a mother in a boating accident who cried out, “Lord, please, let me get to my babies,” but all three of her young children drowned, I asked, “Where is God?”

I found hundreds of these kinds of entries. It became a familiar litany in my journal. When one of my favorite church members suffered and died from ALS, when a young woman in my congregation was brutally murdered, when my mother-in-law died in a car wreck, and when I suffered for decades with a painful vocal cord disorder that constantly threatened my vocation, I asked, “Where is God?” Although I tried mightily, I never found a satisfactory answer.

Defending Providence

In spite of these painful theological and spiritual struggles, I tried my best to hang on to some version of belief in God’s providence. And I tried to help my congregants do the

same. So when horrible things happened, either locally or beyond, I found myself trying to defend God's providential care in the world. For example, on the Sunday after the mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015, I said in my sermon:

> *We must remember that* ***God does not cause suffering****. God does not get up in the morning and say, "I think I'll give a seven-year-old girl a case of leukemia today, send a massive heart attack to a fifty-seven-year-old man, and send a category four tornado to wipe out a community. And then, to finish off the day, I'll send a deeply disturbed, hate-filled white supremist to a black church in Charleston and kill off nine people during their Wednesday night prayer meeting."*

This kind of preaching and teaching became standard operating procedure for me. I constantly tried to help members of my congregations (and me) retain faith in a personal, caring and involved God, in spite of rampant suffering in the world. I especially encouraged people to see God's providential hand in human efforts to mitigate suffering, since God mostly works though human instruments. I also reminded them that we belonged to a "crucified God," one who understood and entered our pain, even if it wasn't possible to make the pain go away.

Although these kinds of affirmations proved modestly helpful, in the end they had limited value. In spite of all my arguments to the contrary, a harsh reality remained that could not be ignored. In a world full of unrelenting and massive suffering, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to defend belief in a personal, all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing, interventionist, miracle-working, prayer-answering, providential God.

Providence and the Arts

I've struggled with the notion of providence more than any other theological premise. And unfortunately, given my love for the arts, creative mediums like novels, songs, storytelling, poetry, paintings, theater, television dramas and movies have all contributed to my ongoing loss of faith in the providential care of God. A few examples follow.

About a decade ago I read a novel called ***Paperboy***. Since I worked as a paperboy as a kid, I figured I'd enjoy the story. And I did. But it reminded me of my tenuous belief in providential theology. In this novel, an eleven-year-old boy struggled with stuttering. He asked, "Why can most kids talk without any trouble and not me?" His nanny told him it was "God's plan." He later reflected, "That didn't make any sense to me because a God who would play dirty tricks on a kid like that didn't know very much about being a God." After reading that quote in the novel, I wrote in my journal, "Even little kids understand how problematic it is to believe in God's providential activity in the world."

One Saturday night, while listening to ***A Prairie Home Companion*** on NPR, I listened to singer-songwriter Iris DeMent tell stories from her life and sing songs about them. For example, when she was a child, her little brother fell down the stairs of their home and sustained critical injuries. Her parents rushed him to the hospital. She stayed home and prayed throughout the evening. She even skipped dinner, pleading with God to save her little brother. But in the end he died. Years later, she wrote a song about that experience. She called it, "The Night I Learned How Not to Pray." When she sang the song, tears welled up in my eyes. Like her, I was also learning how not to pray.

While watching ***The Crown*** on Netflix, I learned about the Irish potato famine in the 1800s. A million people died of starvation, and two million left the country. One episode told the story of a Church of England pastor who tried to minister to starving people in his parish. However, since most of them were Catholics and not members of the Church of England, his denomination didn't offer much support, and his colleagues rebuffed him. His wife grew weary of living in such difficult conditions and left him. Soon after her departure, he got sick and died. After watching the story, I wrote in my journal, "So neither God, his wife, or the church helped this clergyman as he tried to follow the example and teachings of Jesus. It's no wonder providential theology seems more like a fairy tale than a reality."

Years ago I watched ***The Grey***, a movie about a group of men stranded in Alaska who found themselves threatened by a pack of wolves. In the final scene of the film, after killing off all the other men, the wolves prepared to attack the lead character. Although he wasn't much of a believer, he prayed for God's help. But no help arrived. He finally

said, “Never mind, I’ll do it myself.” He armed himself with a knife and shards of liquor bottles taped to his hand. Then he and the wolves charged one another, the screen went black, and the movie ended. I’ve thought about that scene many times over the years. In spite of all our prayers for God’s providential help, it seems that we, like the character in that scene, pretty much have to do it ourselves.

If space permitted, I could share hundreds of similar examples of the arts raising questions about the providence of God. The ones listed above were randomly pulled from my journals. All of them, however, share a common theme. They raised serious doubts in my heart and mind about God’s providential activity in the world.

The Death of Providence

A few years before my retirement, I attempted to write a sermon on the subject of providence. It was more for my benefit than for the congregation, although I knew many of them struggled with similar doubts. I titled the sermon “Redefining Providence.”

I spent a long time working on the sermon. In it I suggested that modern believers needed to redefine our understanding of God’s providential care. Instead of thinking of it in terms of God’s *protection*, I argued, we need to redefine it to mean God’s *presence*.

“In other words,” I wrote in the sermon, “while God does not us protect us from suffering, God promises to be with us in the midst of our suffering. That’s what Psalm 23 means when it says, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me” (v. 4 KJV). The sermon looked good on the computer screen. I even found a moving story to illustrate the point. So I printed a hard copy and began my final edit.

However, as I reviewed the sermon, I began to think about how it would sound to the numerous parents in my congregation who watched their children die from illnesses or accidents. Or to the women who experienced domestic abuse. Or to the rape victim I had recently spoken to. Or to couples who desperately wanted to have children but

could not. Or to all the widows and widowers sitting in the pews who still felt deep grief over the death of their spouses.

Or to people who prayed for God to save their marriages but still ended up getting divorced. Or to unemployed persons who could not find a job. Or to those who struggled with addictions. Or to people who were fighting a losing battle to cancer. Or to members who no longer felt the presence of God in their lives in spite of desperately seeking it. The list went on and on. And I realized, the points in my sermon would sound like trite religious platitudes to them. They certainly sounded that way to me.

Then I thought about all the suffering occurring around the world, including wars, violence, famine, racism, genocide, injustice, climate change, pandemics, birth defects, child abuse, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and dementia. My sermon could not begin to stand up to such overwhelming and brutal suffering.

At that point, I pulled out a black Sharpie pen from my top desk drawer and marked through the title, ~~"Redefining Providence."~~ I wrote above it in large bold print, underlining each word, **"THE DEATH OF PROVIDENCE."**

I took the sermon manuscript and threw it into the trash can. My long struggle to believe in the providence of God had finally come to an end.

I grieved the loss.

[For further reflections about losing faith in providence, see ***Providence and the Pandemic*** and Hurricanes, Holocausts, and Other Horrors: Three Theological Responses to Suffering.]

Chapter 5

I Lost Faith in Institutional Religion

When Robert Harris published his novel ***Conclave*** in 2016, I immediately purchased and read it. In this engaging ecclesiastical narrative, Harris tells about the death of a Pope and the messy, political, and human process of electing a new one. Amazon describes the plot this way:

> *The pope is dead. Behind the locked doors of the Sistine Chapel, one hundred and eighteen cardinals from all over the globe will cast their votes in the world's most secretive election. They are holy men. But they have ambition. And they have rivals. Over the next seventy-two hours one of them will become the most powerful spiritual figure on Earth.*

The main character of the novel, Cardinal Lomeli, served as dean of the College of Cardinals. His role as dean placed him in charge of leading the election for the new Pope. Early in the novel, we learn that Cardinal Lomeli struggled with significant religious doubts.

Soon after the death of the Pope, Cardinal Lomeli engaged in a conversation with another cardinal, a close confidant of the Pope. In that conversation, Cardinal Lomeli discovered that like him, the Pope had also struggled with doubt. The news shocked Cardinal Lomeli.

He said to the Pope's confidant, "The Pope had doubts about God?"

The Pope's friend replied, "Not about God! Never about God! What he had lost faith in was the Church."

An Early Warning

Like this fictional Pope in Conclave, I've also lost much (although not all) of my faith in the church. It didn't happen all at once. Instead, it happened slowly, over the course of five decades. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for my doubts about institutional religion

to surface. In fact, they started on the day of my baptism.

The week after my profession of faith at the age of fifteen, I put on a white robe, waded into the baptismal pool of the sanctuary, and got plunged into the sacred waters of baptism. That afternoon at a special family luncheon, my relatives celebrated my newfound faith, baptism, and church membership (where all of them were lifelong members). When he offered grace over the meal, my grandfather profusely thanked God for saving my soul and bringing me into the Christian fold. The baptism day feast then began, featuring fried chicken, pot roast, southern style vegetables, sweet iced tea, and homemade lemon meringue pie.

Lunch conversation ranged from church to sports to politics. One of my kinfolks vigorously complained about the forced busing program being implemented to integrate our local schools, including the high school I attended.

He then began railing about (I remember the words vividly) “all those uppity niggers who are ruining our country and our community.” Nobody blinked an eye. Nobody took offense. Instead, his opinion summarized the family consensus.

The people sitting around the table that day celebrating my baptism were good folks with sincere faith and noble traits whom I loved and adored (and still do). But not one of them realized how incongruent their racial prejudices were with their professed faith in Jesus Christ.

Although I felt uncomfortable and disappointed with the discussion, I wasn’t sure how to articulate my discomfort or even if I should, so I remained silent. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was getting my first lesson in the frequent disconnect between institutional churchgoers and Jesus of Nazareth. It wouldn’t be the last. And while this example happened in an evangelical congregation, sadly, the same dynamics can also be found in Catholic and mainline traditions.

Retired from Religion

The largest and fastest growing “religious” group in America today is people with no

religious affiliation. As the creator and author of Doubter's Parish, I talk to many of them on a regular basis. One of them told me, "I used to go to church. But not anymore. I've retired from religion." I found that comment interesting, so I asked him to explain.

He said, "My wife is a Roman Catholic. But you couldn't pay me to go to her church. All those priests molested hundreds of thousands of children all over the world. Bishops covered it up. And virtually nobody was ever held accountable. They have no moral authority anymore. Why would anybody go to a Catholic Church after all of that?"

He continued, "I'm certainly not going to attend an evangelical church. American evangelicals worship Donald Trump more than Jesus Christ. Given their unwavering partisan support for an immoral and incompetent man who divides and inflames the country, they have lost all credibility."

Then he said, "I tried a few mainline churches, including a United Methodist and a Presbyterian congregation. But they are so worried about losing members, they've become hopelessly politically correct, trying desperately not to offend anybody. They won't take a stand on anything. I don't have any interest in milk-toast religion like that."

He concluded by saying, "I haven't lost faith in God; I've lost faith in the church. I still worship God, love Jesus, pray daily, and live ethically. But I'm done with organized religion."

I don't know yet if I'm done with organized religion. But I do understand this man's frustration. Like him, I'm deeply disappointed with institutional religion.

I've already discussed my loss of faith in the evangelical church. But unfortunately, my loss of confidence in organized religion isn't limited to the religious right. It extends to every branch of institutional religion—evangelical, mainline, Catholic, and Orthodox—including my own United Methodist Church. This chapter reviews some of the reasons.

A Long History of Bad Behavior

Before going any further, I need make an important disclaimer. This chapter's critique

of institutional religion is not the whole story. Many churches and other religious entities make positive contributions. For example, they build community, provide meaning, encourage compassion, and seek justice. I've seen firsthand that religion does a lot of good in the world, including my own personal world, and I'll have more to say about that in part 2. So this chapter is only one-half of the truth about institutional religion.

However, in spite of the positives, we cannot deny a stark and depressing reality. Institutional Christianity has a long and deeply blemished history including the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch burnings, bloody religious wars, intolerance, racism, sexism, and environmental degradation. American Christianity added support of slavery, abuse of Native Americans, backing of Jim Crow laws, resistance to civil rights, and "God and America" nationalism. Sadly, bad behavior by institutional religion is not limited to the past. Instead, it continues unabated into the present.

Close to Home

For example, over the past decade, I have watched in horror as members of my own tribe, the United Methodist Church, have viciously condemned one another over LBGTQ issues, resulting in the largest schism in American church history since the Civil War. The battle has been exceptionally ugly, including character assassination and disinformation campaigns on both sides of the debate, especially on the right. This deeply unchristian behavior makes me embarrassed to be a United Methodist.

If space permitted, many other UMC embarrassments could also be mentioned. For example, in the 2020 election, it wasn't just the evangelicals (over 80%) who supported Donald Trump. A significant majority (62%) of United Methodists also voted for him. Not only does he violate every value Jesus stood for, but he also violates every social principle listed in the United Methodist Book of Discipline. This tragic reality represents a massive failure of my denomination to fulfill its stated mission to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Unfortunately, hundreds of examples of religious institutions getting it wrong could be cited. And such examples can be found in every sector of the church. A review of over two thousand years of Christian history confirms that bad behavior in the church is not

an anomaly but the norm. Clearly, the church of Jesus Christ, both past and present, has miserably failed to live up to its ideals. In response to these never-ending failures, a large and growing number of people are leaving institutional religion for good. According to The Deconstruction Network, twenty-seven hundred people leave the American church every day. And who can blame them? Even the most faithful church members are wondering if it's worth it anymore, including a lot of clergypersons, me included.

A Litany of Frustrations

My original plan for this chapter was to highlight a long litany of frustrations with the church including (but not limited to) the following examples:

- Its chronic pettiness
- Its endless conflicts
- Its cruelty against the LGBTQ community
- Its fierce resistance to change
- Its failure to engage in social justice
- Its disregard of science
- Its rigid and outdated theological doctrines
- Its toxic bureaucracy
- Its inability to form authentic Christian values among its members
- Its selfish spending patterns, using almost all of its income on its own members
- Its pitiful response to clergy sexual abuse (Catholic and Protestant)
- And its prioritization of institutional survival over following Jesus

However, as I began working on this chapter, I realized that these concerns (and many others) could not be covered in one chapter. It would take at least a full-length book to adequately review them. And, since most readers of this book are already painfully

aware of these failures, pointing out the details would prove unproductive. So I decided to focus the remainder of this chapter on a brief but overwhelmingly painful pastorate, the one most responsible for my loss of faith in institutional religion.

My Brutal Pastorate

Upon my retirement, just for fun, I came up with nicknames for all my pastorates. For example, “My Good Start Pastorate,” “My Contented Pastorate,” and “My Camelot Pastorate.” The one I’m going to tell you about in this chapter earned the nickname “My Brutal Pastorate.”

At first, serving as the senior pastor of a megachurch felt exciting. The church had ten thousand members (adults and children), an impressive facility, a massive budget, remarkable programs and ministries, a huge staff, and I even got a company car. However, my initial excitement was extremely short-lived.

During my first week on the job, I received more than a dozen critical emails from the congregation over not using the pulpit on my first Sunday, which I had not done for decades. They said I had “banished God from the sanctuary,” that I was “a disgrace to the ministry,” that I “would not last a year,” and “we are going to get rid of you.” As it turned out, this was a fairly minimal week of criticisms. Things got much worse in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

In my former pastorates I had been mostly loved, appreciated, and affirmed. So I was not prepared for the nonstop daily criticism that came with this job. For two years I rarely led a worship service, preached a sermon, wrote a newsletter article, or led a meeting that was not severely criticized. One person even went after my wife. She received an anonymous letter saying her husband would die, leaving her emotionally and financially destitute.

It’s important to note that the church was mostly full of good folks. However, it included a group of people that, according to a key leader, “are chronically unhappy,” “viciously attack every pastor we get,” and “are a cancer in the church.”

Although this “chronically unhappy” group was a fairly small minority, they were powerful people who condemned me (and those who preceded me) relentlessly and without mercy. No doubt I deserved some of the criticism. Pastoring a megachurch for the first time requires a huge learning curve, and I certainly made some mistakes. But these folks were certifiably abusive.

It’s impossible to recount the complex events of those two horrific years (and the years of post-traumatic stress that followed) in one chapter. Instead, I’ll share a few representative examples of the relentless condemnation I received on an almost daily basis.

Constant Condemnation

Mondays were the worst day of the week because my email box always included critical messages about Sunday’s service and sermon. For example, just a few weeks after I arrived, I showed a ninety-second video clip that introduced the worship theme. My inbox included harsh complaints about the clip, including a member who said, “I don’t come to worship to be entertained. You are an embarrassment to our church and are not worthy to be our pastor.”

A few months later a gifted soloist sang a moving song during the worship services. But rather than complimenting him, my inbox was full of complaints about what he wore. One member said, “How dare you allow someone wearing blue jeans and an untucked shirt to sing in our sacred sanctuary.”

Early on I preached a sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. Every Monday morning during the series, I received complaints in my inbox. For example, when I preached on “Our Father,” I affirmed that God was like a good father or mother. Several people expressed outrage that I used feminine imagery about God. When I preached on “thy kingdom come,” I told several rapid-fire examples of what the kingdom of God might look like in today’s world. In the offering plate that morning I received a sermon scorecard. It said: “Bible references: one. Stories: five. Sermon grade: F.” When I preached on “our daily bread,” I warned about greed. The next day I received several messages saying I had condemned the free enterprise system and that the church

didn't want a "socialist" pastor.

Virtually every Sunday was the same. For example, on the Monday after Mother's Day, a member vigorously attacked me for preaching on Christian marriage instead of motherhood. One Sunday, when I projected a photograph of the family receiving our Habitat for Humanity house, several members severely criticized me for using the projection screen during the traditional service. On another Sunday, we had the congregation sing the Lord's Prayer. A person complained about us singing, not speaking, the prayer. They said we had "ruined" the prayer for them. One man once complained that he could no longer worship in the sanctuary because, from his seat, he could see the corner of the drum set that we used for the contemporary service (and hid behind the pulpit during the traditional services).

On several occasions, when I quoted Jesus directly, including his words about welcoming strangers, I received hateful emails, including one person who said, "Illegal aliens are invading and destroying our country, and we don't need a liberal preacher telling us to welcome them with open arms." Once I received an email condemning me for not taking a stand against "the socialist, God-hating, Muslim-loving, gay-worshipping Democratic Party." He said the church needed to fire me and hire "a real man of God who isn't afraid to preach the truth."

When we took a worship survey, we asked the congregation to make suggestions for future sermon series. One person wrote, "I can't think of anything worse in this world than a new sermon series by Dr. Martin Thielen. Please spare me." I received dozens of these kinds of hateful responses. I later found out the condemnations were an organized effort by a group of my critics who wanted to hurt me. It worked.

But the constant condemnations weren't limited to issues around worship and preaching. For example, after a task force spent months working on a new mission statement, we presented it to the congregation. Right on cue, the critics emerged, immediately attacking the work. One said, "All slogan, no substance." Another said, "A weak statement from a weak team under a weak pastor. It's time for you to go."

One day, a well-known and influential couple came to my office and said, “We are going to rally the church to get rid of you. And we won’t stop until we succeed.” They proved faithful to their word. They led a group of about fifteen people to write a joint letter of complaint about me to our bishop. The letter was full of misinformation, disinformation, and outright lies. It had a major influence in the bishop’s decision to move me.

The Cumulative Impact

While all of these examples hurt, the real pain was the cumulative effect. These sorts of incidents happened virtually every single day. If space permitted, I could share hundreds of additional examples. I remember sharing my situation with a national United Methodist leader who was familiar with that congregation. He said, ‘We’ve known for years that ____ is an impossible place to serve and a preacher killer church. They eat their pastors alive there. It sounds like you are fighting an unwinnable war.”

About a year into the pastorate, my best friend asked me how I was doing. I told him, “My gut stays in a knot twenty-four hours a day. I can’t sleep worth crap. I work at least eighty hours a week. I receive vicious emails every day. I never feel comfortable. I don’t have any fun. Lots of people hate my guts. And I cry a lot. Other than that, I’m fine.”

Near the end of my tenure, the bishop told me that I was “swimming upstream” at the church. That night I wrote in my journal, “He’s right. I am swimming upstream. But after decades of pastors getting brutally crushed here, maybe it’s time to consider the possibility that the primary problem isn’t the lead fish. Perhaps the problem is the toxic stream.”

Given the massive size of the congregation, most members had no idea this kind of cruelty was occurring in their church on a daily basis. However, plenty of members have known about this abusive group of “chronically unhappy” people for decades and have never challenged them. And state denominational leaders have also known about these toxic dynamics but have never had the courage to address them. So there’s plenty of blame to go around, including my own contributions to the problem. But regardless of blame, the personal and professional cost I paid for serving this church is

hard to put into words. If I could change one thing in my life, I would delete this horrific chapter. It offered no redeeming benefits. I gained nothing of value from it. It was simply pain for pain's sake. And the pain was overwhelming.

The Cost of Service

A decade after leaving that congregation I wrote an entry in my journal called "The True Cost of Serving at ___ UMC."

- Ten months of intense pre-arrival stress
- Two years of absolute hell
- Two years of severe PTSD
- Three years of moderate PTSD
- Spiritual, emotional, and physical diminishment
- Loss of financial resources
- Loss of faith in the institutional church
- Loss of self-confidence
- Loss of professional status
- Loss of vocational joy

"I Can't Beat It"

As already noted, only a small minority of the congregation inflicted this pain, but they were an exceptionally vocal and powerful minority. And, in a church with that many members, even a small minority includes hundreds of people. Until that point, I never knew church people could be so vicious. In the end their cruelty destroyed my vocation.

I realize some readers would like to challenge me on this. You would say something like, "If this megachurch destroyed your vocation, that's on you. You should never have allowed them to have that much power over you." And I agree with that argument. I

shouldn't have let them have that much power over me. It was weak of me to permit that. But in the end, I didn't have the mental, spiritual, physical, emotional or vocational energy to fight anymore. I was broken.

The pain I felt, both during and after that pastorate, reminds me of a haunting movie called ***Manchester by the Sea***. In this film a man made a horrible and deadly mistake that stalked him the rest of his life. After drinking too much alcohol at a party one night, he added several logs to the family fireplace, but forgot to replace the protective screen. Then he left the house to buy more beer, leaving his kids unattended. In his absence, the children perished in a fire.

As you would expect, this tragedy destroyed him, his wife, and their marriage. At one point he told a friend that in spite of trying to move on with his life, he could not overcome his debilitating feelings of grief and failure. He said, "I can't beat it."
I'm not suggesting my pain was anything like the pain of a father who lost his children. Clearly it *was not*. But like that character in the movie, I just couldn't beat it. That nightmare pastorate resulted in the death of my faith in the local church, my denomination, and my vocation. And I never got it back. I went on to pastor another church, did a competent job, and was well received by the congregation. But it wasn't the same anymore. I once had a vocation that I loved. Now I had a job that I tolerated. My vocation was already dead. It was just a matter of time before I buried it.

Lingering in a Land You've Already Left

For all the reasons listed in this chapter, plus many others not mentioned, I slowly lost faith in institutional religion. And my story is certainly not unique. For example, I belong to a support group of seven retired mainline clergypersons. All seven of us are deeply disappointed in the church. Six of us no longer actively participate in a congregation. If you do the math, that means 86 percent of my group has left institutional religion (at least for now). And we are not an anomaly.

A couple of years ago, an old friend and I talked about our uneasy relationship with the church. We've both been deeply blessed—and deeply wounded—by institutional

religion. Although part of us wants to connect with a community of faith, we're not sure we want to carry the toxic baggage that inevitably comes with it. We both feel deep affinity for Jesus and still seek to follow him. We're definitely not post-Jesus. However, to our great surprise and deep sadness, we are both considering the once unthinkable possibility of becoming post-church.

During our long conversation, my friend shared a quote attributed to Alfred North Whitehead. The English mathematician and philosopher once said, "Tis a great tragedy to linger in a land through which one has already passed." My friend and I wondered aloud if we had already passed through the land of institutional religion. Neither one of us is sure if we want to linger there much longer. Part of us wants to. But part of us doesn't.

For now, the question remains unresolved.

[For further reflections about losing faith in institutional religion, see *What to Do about Church?*, *Leaving Church?*, *Can Christianity Be Deinstitutionalized?*, *Why Retired Clergy Lose Faith and Leave Church*, *The Self-Destructive American Church*, *Jesus-less Christianity*, *My Brief Life as a Megachurch Pastor*, and *Church on Fire*.]

Chapter 6

I Lost Faith in a Traditional God

A few years ago, my colorful friend John picked up his cell phone and said, “Siri, call God.”

Siri responded, *“I don’t see God in your contacts. Should I look for locations by that name?”*

“Yes,” John replied. Siri then listed nearby churches with “God” in their name.

John instructed Siri to call the first one on the list. A moment later John heard a recording say, *“The number you have called has been disconnected and is no longer a working number.”*

For millions of people in the twenty-first century, God (as we have historically known God) is no longer a working number. A personal, providential, all-powerful, all-knowing, supernatural, miracle-working, prayer-answering, interventionalist heavenly father no longer resonates with a significant percentage of the population. Some of them have given up on the concept of God altogether. Others are forging new models of God.

No Longer Believable

Of course, skepticism about a traditional deity is nothing new. Back in 1966, ***Time*** magazine set off a cultural and religious firestorm with their front cover story, *“Is God Dead?”* One of the scholars cited in the infamous ***Time*** article was Thomas Altizer. He argued that the traditional theistic God of Christianity “is no longer present, no longer manifest, no longer real.”

Nearly six decades later, a large and growing number of people concur with Thomas Altizer’s assessment. For example, in his last published book, ***Unbelievable***, the late Bishop John Shelby Spong asserts, “Understanding God in theistic terms as ‘a being,’ supernatural in power, dwelling somewhere external to the world and capable of

intervening in the world with miraculous power, is no longer believable."

Bishop Spong has a lot of company. In ***The Heart of Christianity***, Marcus Borg asserts that "traditional supernatural theism is no longer compelling and persuasive." In ***The God You Didn't Know You Could Believe In***, Jeffrey Frantz writes, "The conventional God of our Judeo-Christian tradition is an inadequate conception of God." In ***Saving God from Religion***, Robin Meyers claims that "traditional theism has run its course and has been rejected by millions."

In his book ***Not Sure***, John Suk asks, "Does belief in a supernatural God make any sense at all?" As his book title suggests, he's not sure. In ***Stars beneath Us***, Paul Wallace writes, "The God of classical theism no longer works for me at all." Finally, in ***God: A Human History***, Reza Aslan correctly notes that for the vast majority of people, "God is a divine version of ourselves: a human being but with superhuman powers." He argues that we need to reverse this trend. Instead of humanizing God, it's time to *dehumanize* God.

Dozens of additional examples could be given. But the point is clear. Large numbers of Christians in the twenty-first-century, including me, no longer believe in a God who is, in the words of Brian McClaren, "an old big white guy on a throne in the sky."

Flunking Piety

For the first few years of my Christian journey, I didn't question belief in a traditional God. During high school I had "a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" and affirmed faith in God as "my loving heavenly father." But it didn't take long for doubts to emerge.

Even during college and seminary, I wondered about the personal nature of God. I struggled to maintain a devotional life. I wasn't sure how to pray. Who exactly was I talking to? God seemed increasingly distant and vague. My "personal relationship" with Jesus and God, which felt so vibrant during high school, began to wane.

I should have known I was in trouble when I received results from my "Readiness for Ministry" assessment in seminary. I tested high in areas like congregational leadership,

public speaking, theological acuity, and pastoral care. But I flunked "personal piety." That category measured things like daily devotionals, prayer, and feeling emotionally connected to God. That (accurate) assessment dogged me throughout my ministerial career.

A few weeks before departing seminary, I wrote in my journal, "God remains a huge mystery to me. How can someone who knows so little of God tell others about him?" I didn't know it at the time, but I was embarking on a long arduous journey away from a traditional theistic understanding of God. And I can tell you from firsthand experience, that spiritual journey is not for the faint of heart.

One Hour to Affirm Theistic Faith, Forty-Five Years to Lose It

In a journal entry in 2020, I wrote, "It only took one hour for me to affirm belief in a traditional theistic God (referring to my profession of faith at age fifteen). It took forty-five years to lose it. It was a long, hard, slow, painful death."

It's not possible to explain my loss of faith in a traditional God in a few pages. But the following journal excerpts, written over many years, might shed a bit of light on the journey.

- "I feel distant from God and have for a long time. I don't have an experiential, personal relationship with God anymore. Instead, God seems nebulous, elusive, and unknowable."
- "My pressing question is not, Do I believe in God? My pressing question is, *What kind of God do I believe in?* The God of my sixteen-year-old faith no longer exists. But I'm not sure what to replace it with."
- "I came across a quote today that said, 'The infinite God is too complex, too large, to be contained within any one religious system, including Christianity.' That won't sell at church. But it's true."
- "I'm not losing my faith in God but my faith in a traditional God. I don't know what I believe about God anymore; I'm unfamiliar with him. But the things I've been taught to believe about God no longer make any sense to me. If I'm going to have a future as a Christian and a minister, I'm going to have to redefine my

understanding of God."

- "I read a poem today by Denise Levestov about our inability to comprehend God. In one line she said, 'I had grasped God's garment in the void / but my hand slipped / on the rich silk of it.' The hard truth is that it's impossible to grasp God. I know virtually nothing anymore about the Almighty, including if God is actually almighty."

- "I've been reading Bishop Spong. His answer to my theological quandary is to jettison a theistic God. And I resonate with that. His book ***Why Christianity Must Change or Die*** describes exactly what I've been thinking for years about the unbelievability of a supernatural God and a divine Christ in an age of scientific knowledge. But can an impersonal God and a nondivine Jesus sustain a Christian believer or a faith community? It seems unlikely to me."

- "A parishioner spoke to me today about "the man upstairs." But from my perspective, the "man upstairs," who is neither a man nor lives upstairs, has moved. Where to, I'm not sure. But he's clearly not returning. And he didn't leave a forwarding address."

- "I finished Barbara Brown Taylor's new book, ***Learning to Walk in the Dark***. Taylor has clearly abandoned faith in traditional Christianity. She acknowledges that the faith we inherited from our elders "is all worn out." So she's replaced it with an uncertain and open-ended faith. She acknowledges that her new faith "will not offer me much to hold on to. It will not give me a space to settle." I wish she had a more viable replacement for traditional faith. She doesn't expect to find one in her lifetime. I probably won't either."

- "For decades now, I have felt guilty for doubting traditional beliefs about God and for not feeling close to him. I've beaten myself up literally thousands of times for not having enough faith, especially for a minister. But I've finally come to realize that the problem wasn't inadequate faith. The problem was *an inadequate concept of God*. I don't need to feel guilty anymore for not believing in (or feeling emotionally close to) an antiquated deity who doesn't exist."

- "I can't deny it anymore. I've lost God. At least the God I used to know. The personal, powerful, providential theistic God of orthodox Christianity is dead to me. It's time to mourn the loss and figure out how to proceed from here."

The Only Sin Would Be to Pretend

Several years ago a close friend gave me a book called ***For Small Creatures Such as We***. The book was written by Sasha Sagan, daughter of Carl Sagan, the famous scientist (now deceased) who narrated and cowrote the hugely popular public TV series, ***Cosmos***.

Early in her book, Sasha tells a story about her grandfather Harry, who grew up in a devout Jewish family. During his college years, Harry made a momentous trip home. During the visit, he shared extremely difficult news with his father.

Harry told his dad that he would no longer keep Jewish kosher laws, no longer pray, and no longer attend Friday night synagogue worship. Why not? Because he didn't believe anymore. Not in the teachings he was brought up with, not in the Torah, not even in God.

Harry braced for his father's reaction. Given his dad's deep devotion to Judaism, Harry expected him to lash out with anger, disappointment, and feelings of betrayal. But instead, Sasha recounts, *"My great-grandfather looked up and smiled at his son and said the immortal words: 'The only sin would be to pretend.'"*

Unlike Harry, I am not an atheist, as I will explain in chapter 8, "I Still Believe In God." However, like Harry, I no longer affirm traditional religious beliefs in a theistic God. And I am not willing to pretend that I do.

The truth is, I've lost faith in a personal, all-powerful, providential God who lives "out there" somewhere, controls the weather, intervenes in the world, performs miracles, and answers prayers. I can't believe in that kind of God anymore, although I wish I could.

I'd like to believe in (and emotionally experience) a heavenly father who claims me as his beloved child. I'd like to believe in a providential God who protects me from harm. I'd like to believe in a personal God I can feel close to and be comforted by. I'd like to believe in an all-powerful God who guides and controls the world, including my world.

Who wouldn't want a God like that? These deeply felt human needs are why humanity, over time, created religions with a supernatural, parental, humanlike God in the first place. But I'm no longer able to believe such things. I didn't choose to lose faith in a traditional God. Over the decades, it just slowly and involuntarily evaporated.

However, for many years, I did hold traditional theistic beliefs. And those beliefs met extremely important needs in my life. Like many others, I grew up in a seriously dysfunctional family. For example, I did not have a loving father. He never once told me (or showed me) that he loved me. Quite the opposite was true. Nor did I have a nurturing family or stabilizing community. These deficits left huge voids in my life. So God became my surrogate father. And the church became my surrogate family and community. Thank goodness for that. I'd be a total wreck without that faith. But in the end, it didn't hold.

The Day God Fell from the Ceiling

A few years ago I read a book called ***Saving God from Religion*** by Robin Meyers. In the book, Meyers tells a story about attending an art class during college. During the class the professor showed slides of Michelangelo's magnificent frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The last slide featured the chapel's most famous painting, ***The Creation of Adam***. In it, God is depicted as an elderly white and bearded man, wrapped in a swirling cloak, reaching his right arm toward Adam, his greatest creation.

Years later, Robin Meyers had a dream about that famous painting. In the dream, he served as caretaker for the Sistine Chapel. One day he heard a loud crash in the chapel. He quickly ran inside. On the floor, in a thousand pieces, was all that remained of the most famous fresco in the world. He looked up to the ceiling. The plaster where Michelangelo's image of God had been fixed for five hundred years had broken lose and fallen to the floor. God had fallen off the ceiling. The painting was completely destroyed and could never be repaired.

Meyers used that story as the overarching metaphor of his book. The traditional theistic God of orthodox Christianity, argued Meyers, is no longer viable. He admitted that "the loss of such a deity poses an existential threat to the religious franchise. Yet our

survival now depends upon the death of Michelangelo's God. He cannot be put back together again, much less reattached to the ceiling of a world that no longer exists."

In short, Meyers claims that God—as we have historically understood God—no longer exists. It turns out that ***Time*** magazine was correct way back in 1966. God, at least the God of classical theistic Christianity, is dead. But still, it's exceptionally hard to bury him.

Weeping at the Divine Grave

After decades of struggle, I finally came to the difficult realization that my faith in a traditional theistic God was gone and never coming back. Michelangelo's personal, powerful, supernatural, external, interventionalist, humanlike parental God who's "got the whole world in his hands" had fallen from the sky and smashed into smithereens. I deeply grieved the loss.

During that time of existential crisis, personally and professionally, I came upon a quote that cut me to my core. I read the troubling quote over and over. Each time I did, I felt a piece of my heart and soul rip.

The quotation came from a book called ***Conversations at Midnight***, written by the twentieth-century poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. In it she said, "God is dead and modern men gather nightly around the divine grave to weep."

I stared at the quote for a long time. Then I turned on my smart phone and asked Siri to play Don McLean's classic rock-and-roll song, "American Pie." At first I just listened. But near the end of the song, I began singing along with McLean as he spoke about broken church bells, going to a sacred store where the music no longer played, and God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost skipping town on the "day the music died."

And then, in the evocative words of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry, I went to the divine grave and wept.

[For further reflections about losing faith in a traditional God see *God Is No Longer a Working Number: Rethinking Christianity in the Twenty-First Century*, *Orthodox No Longer*, *Three Possible Paths for People Who Lose Traditional Religion*, *Do You Think I Am Still a Christian?*, and *An Inconvenient Loss of Faith: A Theological Novel*.]

Chapter 7

I Lost Faith in My Ministerial Vocation

As you would expect, losing faith in traditional religion complicated my ministerial vocation. As the title of my novel suggests, it was “an inconvenient loss of faith.” Eventually, that loss of faith brought a premature end to my vocation as a minister of the gospel. However, it occurred slowly, over the course of many decades.

Although losing faith in a literal Bible caused significant problems for my Southern Baptist career, I still found it liberating. In fact, as already noted, taking the Bible “seriously but not literally” saved my faith.

Losing faith in the evangelical church proved far more painful. Leaving your family, even a dysfunctional one, cuts to the core. However, in the end, that necessary ending also proved liberating. Leaving a fundamentalist denomination for a more progressive one was an exceptionally life-giving decision.

Losing faith in traditional doctrines created a host of challenges for my religious vocation. However, it resulted in a more honest, mature, and authentic life of faith. I also discovered that I wasn’t alone on that journey. Many people in the pews, and plenty of those in the pulpits, harbored similar doubts, which I found encouraging.

Even losing faith in God’s providential care, to a point, wasn’t a deal breaker for my vocation. Although I lost faith in God’s direct supernatural intervention, I still believed God worked in the world through human instruments and that the “crucified God” suffered with humanity. And that was enough to sustain me as a minister for a long time.

Had my religious doubts ended there, I could have remained in mainline Christian ministry as long as I wanted. Unfortunately, that wasn’t my experience. When my doctrinal doubts extended beyond secondary issues (like hell and blood atonement) to core Christian doctrines about a supernatural God and a divine Christ, the stakes became much higher. Those simmering theological doubts, combined with my

agonizing slow-motion loss of faith in institutional religion, inevitably led to a full-blown vocational crisis.

The Whiskey Priest

During those difficult years of doubt, I happened to read Graham Greene's novel, ***The Power and the Glory***. In this story, an unnamed "whiskey priest" was on the run. The Mexican government had outlawed the Catholic Church and was tracking down and killing all the priests. The whiskey priest was one of (if not the last) remaining clerical rebels.

The novel quickly revealed that the whiskey priest was a deeply flawed clergyman. He drank too much. He loved the pleasures of this world more than the promise of the world to come. He suffered with religious doubts. He struggled to pray. And, in violation of his priestly vows of celibacy, he fathered a child.

And yet, even upon threat of death, the whiskey priest continued to carry out his calling and vocation. He led contraband Catholic masses. He administered the sacraments. He listened to confessions. He prayed for the sick. And he buried the dead.

I had little in common with the whiskey priest. I didn't drink. I was in a committed monogamous marriage. My vocation was not under threat from the government or anyone else. Instead, my profession was highly respected. Still, I deeply resonated with this priest who, in spite of all his doubts and flaws, continued to fulfill his priestly duties.

Notes from a Heretical Preacher

For years, I managed to maintain just enough faith to continue my ministerial vocation with integrity. However, as my doubts grew in intensity, it became increasingly difficult to remain in ministry, as the following journal entries illustrate.

- "I continue to evolve away from traditional faith and toward nontraditional faith. I cannot, in good conscience, fully embrace orthodox Christianity anymore. However, I'm not yet ready to completely abandon it either. So I live on this

high-wire tightrope, trying my best not to fall off. I wonder, *How long I can keep my balance?*"

- "All of these endless doubts about God and church are confusing, threatening, and exhausting for a person in my profession. But ministry is all I know. It's what I do. It's who I am. Sometimes I feel like a one-trick pony who's getting tired of the trick."
- "My spiritual gas tank for sustaining pastoral work is just about running on empty. And I don't see a refill coming anytime soon—if ever."
- "I continue to struggle, virtually daily, with conventional faith and institutional religion. Sometimes I feel like a 'dead pastor walking.'"
- "Jim (my best friend and also a minister) told me today he was 'growing tired of the dance.' He was speaking about the 'dance' of performing pastoral ministry while losing traditional faith. For example, he regularly struggles with what to preach and how to pray while still keeping his integrity. Like Jim, I'm getting tired out there on the dance floor."
- "I watched ***Forrest Gump*** again last night. I especially resonated with his long run across America. I feel like I've made a similar long-distance run as a vocational minister. After years of running, Forrest abruptly stopped and said, 'I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now.' I'm about ready to do the same thing."
- "I read ***Leaving Church*** again by Barbara Brown Taylor. I felt deeply moved by her quote about leaving institutional religion and pastoral ministry. She said, 'It was a good life for a long time. And then it came to an end.' That is rapidly becoming my story as well."

The Rocking Horse

Near the end of my ministerial vocation, I rewatched the 1960 Hollywood classic, ***Inherit the Wind***. It's a fictionalized account of the famous "Scopes Monkey Trial" that occurred in a Tennessee courtroom in 1925 over the teaching of evolution in a public school.

In the film, two well-known attorneys of the day tried the famous case. Although they shared an old friendship, in recent years they had grown apart, primarily over religion. One evening, the two men sat together on the front porch of the boarding house where they were staying during the trial, and they had a long conversation.

The prosecuting attorney, a devout believer, asked his old friend, an agnostic, why he wanted to take people's religion away from them since it gave them comfort and hope. He noted that many religious folks were poor and uneducated, and religion was all they had to hold on to.

Rather than arguing the point, the attorney for the defense told a story from his childhood. When he was a boy, he became enamored with a beautiful rocking horse in the front window of a department store. Although he wanted the rocking horse more than anything, his parents could not afford it.

However, after skimping for months, the parents managed to buy the horse for his birthday. He joyfully jumped on the rocking horse and rode it with abandon. But within minutes, the horse broke apart. It was built with shoddy materials, and the wood had also dry-rotted.

He went on to explain that institutional religion was like that rocking horse, beautiful on the outside but unable to bear the weight of reason and enlightenment. It was also infected with dry rot, including ignorance, intolerance, and bigotry—as was clearly evidenced that week among the religious community in the little town where the trial was held.

Over the next several months, I reflected on that movie scene. It served as a powerful metaphor for my own religious experience. Like that attorney, I wanted a shiny and pretty rocking horse. The horse I bet on was evangelical Christianity, which offered a loving heavenly father and a nurturing family—needs my family of origin could not provide. I also wanted the comfort, hope, certainty, and direction that came with it. So when I first saw that beautiful horse as a teenager, I immediately jumped on with joy. And for a while the ride proved exhilarating.

But the evangelical rocking horse could not hold the weight of science, biblical scrutiny, intellect, hard questions, and religious doubts. I also discovered the horse had dry rot, including toxic religious-right beliefs and attitudes I could not tolerate. Eventually, the evangelical horse broke apart. Still, I desperately wanted a rocking horse to ride, and by then I needed one to maintain my ministerial career.

So I went shopping for a new rocking horse. After exploring the options, I mounted the horse of mainline Christianity and rode it hard for nearly twenty-five years. But it rested on traditional religious foundations that I, over time, could no longer affirm. It also depended on a religious institution that constantly failed to live up to its ideals, and which inflicted enormous pain on me. In spite of those formidable challenges, I held onto that mainline rocking horse as tightly as I could for a long time. But in the end, it became impossible to continue the ride, and I finally had to dismount.

Some clergy successfully navigate similar waters without leaving ministry, and I do not judge them. But for me, continuing to serve a traditional church without affirming its belief system or its institutional structure felt incongruent and disingenuous. So I took early retirement and departed vocational ministry.

No Regrets

However, I'm not sorry for the ride. Professional vocational ministry met a boatload of needs in my life for which I'll forever be grateful. It also proved a good fit for my interests and skills. And, in spite of the struggles, I enjoyed most of it. The good years far outweighed the bad. All in all, vocationally ministry provided an exceptionally good career for me. It also had the added benefit of helping a good number of people along the way, at least in modest ways.

Several years ago, after we had both fully retired from the ministry, my best friend Jim and I talked a long time about our careers in the church. At the end of the conversation, Jim said, "I have no regrets about my vocation. But I'm glad to be done." My sentiments exactly.

Part 2

And What Remains

While part 1 provides an accurate overview of my religious journey, it's not the whole story. Although I've lost much of my original faith, I still affirm the following essential aspects of spirituality:

- I Still Believe in God
- I Still Love Jesus
- I Still Appreciate the Church
- I Still Experience Christian Community
- I Still Attempt to Live a Christian Life

However, before turning to these important subjects, I'd like to make an additional note. As you can see, part 2 of ***My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains*** is shorter than part 1 (five chapters instead of seven). That is by design for the following three reasons.

First, given the fact that part 1 reviews forty-five years of my life and part 2 only reviews five years, some disparity in length is inevitable.

Second, deconstructing faith is far easier than reconstructing it. In the future, I hope to provide more insights about nontraditional faith, especially faith in a nontheistic God. But for now, this is what I have to offer.

Third, I'm at a point in my spiritual life where less is more. I know less about God and faith today than ever before, and I think that is healthy. Spiritually, I'm traveling light these days. When it comes to building a new house of faith, my architectural preference is minimalism.

With that said, let's turn to what remains of my spiritual life.

Chapter 8

I Still Believe in God

I majored in religion at college. One semester I took a class called “Christian Doctrine.” I still remember the final exam. The professor wrote it on the blackboard. It consisted of five words. “Describe the nature of God.”

I took a deep breath, pulled my pen out of my shirt pocket, and opened up my “blue book.” (For younger readers, a blue book is a little blank book with about twenty lined pages that college students used to use for answering long, open-ended, essay exams.) I began writing furiously about the nature of God and didn’t stop for an hour. I just about filled up the entire blue book. And I aced the test. The professor gave me an A+ and wrote, “Well done, Martin.”

Shoebox Theology

I could not replicate that essay today. At age 67, I know far less about God than I did at age 20. Instead, I resonate with Barbara Brown Taylor’s comments in ***Leaving Church***, “I cannot say for sure when my reliable ideas about God began to slip away, but the big chest I used to keep them in is smaller than a shoebox now.” The only difference between her and me is that I would change “shoebox” to “matchbox.” Rather than needing a twenty-page blue book, I could describe what I know about “the nature of God” in a short text.

Most Christians across the globe still affirm belief in a personal, all-powerful God who providentially cares for the world, supernaturally intervenes, answers prayers, and performs miracles. In short, most people of faith still affirm classic theism. And I respect people who hold this orthodox historic view. I did for many years, and it met many important needs in my life.

However, as already noted, for me (and a growing number of others), these ancient theistic concepts about God have become impossible to believe in the modern world. In the words of Bishop John Shelby Spong, “The heart cannot worship what the mind cannot believe.”

After decades of doubting, grappling, thinking, and studying, I no longer believe in the God of fourth-century creeds or orthodox systematic theology. The God I believe in is far less definable and predictable. Instead of conceptualizing God as a personal, humanlike, supernatural deity, I envision God as the mysterious, creative, connective, evolutionary, intelligent, life-force, energy-force, animating Spirit of the universe. Of course, my view may not be correct. But this is where I currently find myself on the spiritual journey. And I have a lot of company.

In Good Company

A nontheistic life-force concept of God is not new or unique. Although a minority view in Christianity, it's been around a long time. And it's gaining ground in the twenty-first century.

We find glimpses of this kind of God in Scripture. For example, in the book of Exodus, God tells Moses, "I am who I am." Some translate that as "I will be who I will be." Moses wanted clarity and precision about God. Instead, God defined God's self in highly mysterious and ambiguous terms. In Acts 17 the apostle Paul spoke about God as the one in whom "we live and move and have our being" (v. 28 NIV). Both of these biblical examples fit well with a nontheistic concept of a life-force, energy-force universal Spirit.

If space permitted, many examples could be given throughout church history of believers who affirmed nontheistic views of God, including the mystic, Julian of Norwich, in the fourteenth century. But for purposes of this chapter, I'm only going to share a handful of contemporary examples.

Perhaps the most well-known advocate of this view is the late Bishop John Shelby Spong. He argued in his many books that "the understanding of God as a theistic supernatural parent in the sky . . . is no longer operative." Instead, he claimed, "The time has come to create a new thing." He didn't offer a simplistic alternative of this "new thing" because it doesn't exist. Instead, he said that "God, the Ground of Being, is the ultimate source of life and love." He defined God "as Being not a being" and said that "God is the life we live, the love we share, the Being in which we are united."

Marcus Borg calls this view of God “panentheism.” This concept “imagines God as the encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is. The universe is not separate from God, but in God.” In other words, “God is not ‘out there,’ but ‘right here,’ all around us.” In this view “God is more than everything, even as everything is in God.” He “images God as a nonmaterial reality pervading the universe as well as being more than the universe.”

Jeffrey Frantz advances this same concept. He says, “The God I refer to is not the God of supernatural theism; God is not an actual being, hovering over the world somehow orchestrating events here on earth. Rather, God is Spirit; God is infinite energy and love, an abiding presence, and endless mystery.”

If space permitted, dozens of other writers could be cited. For example, Diana Butler Bass says, “Roiling around the planet is a shifting conception of God. . . . God in heaven is giving way to the Spirit-within us.” Barbara Brown Taylor offers a concept of God (based on quantum physics) as “the luminous web” of the universe who holds everything and everyone together and who brings energy, intelligence, and passion to the world.

Backstroking into the Unknowable

Each person mentioned above has, over time, shifted from a theistic understanding of God to a nontheistic view. And while they hold slightly differing opinions, they share one thing in common. Their theological views are not simplistic or easy to explain. They remind me of a sixth-grade boy in one of my confirmation classes several years ago who said, “All of this theology is giving me a headache!” But if we want to move beyond a sixth-grade theology, Christians in the modern world need to do some hard thinking about God, even if it gives us a bit of a headache.

Affirming a nontheistic God requires a great deal of theological modesty. As one of my Doubter’s Parish readers recently said to me, affirming this nontraditional view of God is like “backstroking into the unknowable.” Absolute certainty and clarity are not possible with this nebulous model of God. Instead, mystery and ambiguity rule the day.

Describing God as a life-force and energy-force Spirit reminds me of an old movie called ***Children of a Lesser God***. A poignant scene in the film depicts a man joyfully listening to classical music. A deaf woman asks him to describe how music sounds. In sign language and interpretative movements he tries his best but finally gives up and says, "I cannot."

It's impossible to say in words and signs how music sounds. It's also impossible to say in words or images exactly what a nonsupernatural, nontheistic God looks like. Which is one reason it appeals to me so much. As Saint Augustine once said, "If you understand it, it is not God." And as Moses learned at a mysterious burning bush in the desert a long time ago, you can't give God a defining and limiting name, put God in a box, and domesticate God. Instead, the life-animating Spirit of the universe self-identifies as "I am who I am."

In some ways, a modern nontheistic view of God is "going back to the future." In the early days of humanity, people believed in a mysterious, ambiguous, animating, life-force universal Spirit. But eventually, people began to humanize this universal Spirit. So, over the centuries, they created a fertility God, a warrior God, a kingly God, a philosopher God, a father God, and ultimately a human/divine (Jesus) man/God.

Advocates of nontheistic theology believe this long-standing pattern needs to be reversed. Instead of humanizing God into our own image, they argue that we need to dehumanize God. In short, nontheists want to return to the earliest image of God as a mysterious, unifying, life-force, energy-force, animating universal Spirit.

An Evolving View of God

It took decades for my theology to evolve from seeing God as a personal, powerful, supernatural, interventionalist heavenly Father to viewing God as an animating life-force Spirit. The following journal entries record a few brief glimpses of that complex journey.

- "I'm coming to realize that God is far bigger, more complex, and more mysterious than historic orthodox Christianity is willing to acknowledge. I'm holding my traditional beliefs about God more loosely these days."

- “I don’t experience God as a personal, close, heavenly Father like I did before. Instead, I think of God as a great mysterious force. Part of me feels threatened by that change. But part of me is growing more comfortable with the ambiguity.”
- “I don’t think I’m ever going to develop a complete working theology of God. And maybe that unresolved, incomplete, and limited view is good enough. It might even be an improvement from the simplistic certainty I once held.”
- “I’m losing faith in a supernatural God. Instead, I’m coming to believe in a ‘super natural’ God, one who works organically in the natural realm, not the supernatural realm. It’s not as satisfying as the traditional view of an interventionalist, miracle-working God. But it’s far better than trying to believe in a fairy tale God who doesn’t exist.”
- “I had a spiritual experience last night watching a ***60 Minutes*** story about the Hubble telescope. It highlighted our incredible massive universe with billions of galaxies and trillions of planets and stars. And it was magnificent! It also pointed to a universal Spirit of life, energy, creation, evolution, and mystery far beyond the pronouncements of traditional religion about ‘the man upstairs.’”
- “I seem to be shifting toward a new spiritual worldview. A traditional God ‘out there,’ separate from the world, who ‘came down’ to save us through the sacrifice of Jesus feels small and impoverished to me. Instead, I’m increasingly drawn to a life-force Spirit who connects the entire universe (animals, plants, humans, stars, planets, galaxies, and even inanimate objects) together in a mysterious web of interrelated life. This Spirit engulfs the universe (while still being more than the universe), offering a sort of nontraditional transcendence, full of mystery and awe. This is nothing like the God of classic theism. Instead, it feels far richer to me. This could become a life-giving spirituality for my soul but not for my profession. If I fully walk through this door, I’ll have to close many others. It excites and frightens me at the same time.”

From *The Ten Commandments to Star Wars*

This chapter is the most theoretical (and longest) chapter of this book. Why? Because it’s difficult to adequately describe the shift from a theistic to a nontheistic model of God. So, at the risk of massive oversimplification, let me share a movie metaphor to

help make the point.

Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic film, ***The Ten Commandments***, depicts God as an all-knowing and all-powerful interventionist Deity. In this classic film God commands Moses to return to Egypt and convince the pharaoh to liberate the Hebrew people from their bondage in slavery. As the story unfolds, God sets the Israelites free through mighty miracles, including ten plagues on the Egyptians and a dramatic parting of the Red Sea. Moses then presents the Israelites with stone tablets of God's Ten Commandments, which must be faithfully obeyed. This traditional theistic view of a masculine and powerful God who hears prayers, works miracles, and demands obedience is still held by many believers today.

Birthed in 1977, the ***Star Wars*** film franchise has spawned more than a dozen films and other spin-offs. The Star Wars saga is far too complicated to summarize here. But a constant in the Star Wars universe is the presence of "the Force," as in "May the Force be with you." The Force is not a traditional deity or an organized religion. The Star Wars phenomena can illustrate the growing number of people who embrace nontraditional expressions of faith. For them God is not a personal, supernatural, heavenly Father in the sky but a life-force/energy-force spirit that permeates the universe. People who hold this view have abandoned belief in a theistic God. However, they still affirm faith in a spirituality that seeks love and justice in the world, and they desire to engage in that noble effort.

In short, I (along with a lot of other people) have shifted from a theistic The Ten Commandments understanding of God to a nontheistic Star Wars model. This God cannot be placed in a box and fully understood. Instead, this view of God entails a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Strengths of Nontheistic Theology

Every theological model has strengths and weaknesses. That's certainly the case with a nontheistic life-force/energy-force understanding of God. I'll review a few of them now.

On the one hand, there's much to like about this view. For one thing, it's believable in a

modern scientific age. For growing numbers of people, belief in a traditional, personal, superhuman, interventionalist theistic God who controls the world is like believing in the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus. A nontheistic view, at least for many, has intellectual viability. It feels more real, honest, and authentic to them.

Many advocates of this view appreciate its nonexclusive spirit. A nontraditional God is not limited to a specific religious tradition. People don't have to choose between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or a more humanist-focused faith. A nontheistic God can "work" in any religious tradition or no religious tradition.

This nonexclusive spirit reminds me of a scene in a moving episode of ***This Is Us***. In this story, a boy's sister is facing emergency surgery at a hospital on Christmas Eve. While waiting for the surgery to begin, the boy's parents allow him to go to the hospital gift store.

The boy immediately takes interest in a shelf of religious merchandise. First, he looks at a statue of the Virgin Mary. Then he examines a nativity scene featuring the baby Jesus. Finally, he sees a Jewish Menorah used during the holy season of Hannukah. The boy asks the clerk at the story, "If I wanted to pray, which one of these works best?"

The woman responded, "In the end, they all get the job done." People who affirm a nontheistic God do not believe that one religion is right and all the others are wrong. They believe God transcends all human religious constructs, including their own, and see that nonexclusively as a strength.

Many other positives could be added. For example, as briefly mentioned in an earlier chapter, a nontheistic view of God allows people to let go of their anger at God for not providentially intervening to alleviate suffering. A nontheistic God does not and cannot intervene in the world. That's not who a nontheistic God is or what a nontheistic God does. As noted before, this God is a "super natural" God, not a "supernatural" one. Getting angry at a nontheistic God for not being a theistic God would be like getting angry at a dog for not being a horse. It's irrational and unnecessary.

A nontheistic view of God is the only reasonable solution I see to the massive theological problem of suffering. In a world of brutal and overwhelming suffering (both in the natural world and in human history), an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, supernatural, interventionalist God is simply not believable for large numbers of people. If that God existed, the world would look dramatically different than it does. Just a few nights of watching the evening news makes crystal clear that a theistic God does not exist. For nontraditionalists like me, the only viable solution to the theodicy problem (other than atheism), is to adopt a nontheistic view of God.

This theological worldview also reminds people that a traditional theistic God is not going to fix the problems of the world. Instead, it's up to us to solve pressing challenges like climate change, violence, racism, and poverty. And the belief that a life-force spirit engulfs and connects the entire universe together provides a moral imperative for doing so. In short, we are indeed our brother's (and planet's) keeper. Therefore, a nontheistic view of God provides strong motivation to engage in compassionate service and social justice, which is one of its main strengths.

Weaknesses of Nontheistic Theology

Of course, a nontheistic view of God also includes weaknesses. For example, as already seen above, this model of God isn't easy to explain or understand. Instead, it's massively ambiguous, which means it will never attract a large following. Even more problematic, many people will strongly object to this view. In short, most Christians will not make this theological shift. Which reminds me of an old story about a monastery.

In this story, one of the monks died, and they placed him in the large crypt where they buried all the dead monks. Three days later the monks heard noises coming from inside the crypt. When they removed the stone wall, they found their brother alive. Full of wonderment he said, "Oh brothers, I've been there. I've been to the other side. I've seen heaven!" Then he added, "And it's nothing like what we've been taught. It's not at all the way our theology says it is!" When he said those words, the other monks threw him back in the crypt and sealed the wall.

Most religious people don't respond well to having their long-held beliefs questioned!

And that's especially true when it comes to beliefs about the nature of God. Asking traditional believers to jettison their core beliefs about God's identity is too far a stretch for them.

And that traditionalist view must be respected. I'm happy to share my nontheistic beliefs about God with other people. However, I'm not an evangelist for those beliefs. I don't seek to convert people away from theism to nontheism. Instead, I help folks who are already on that journey navigate the (oftentimes) dicey transition.

Another weakness is that this view of God, at least for me, is not as emotionally satisfying as the traditional theistic view. I liked having a providential heavenly Father and a personal relationship with my best friend Jesus. I miss that kind of faith and grieve its loss. But I can no longer believe or experience it. Classical theism no longer makes sense to me. Like many others, I came to a point where I had to either redefine my understanding of God or reject God altogether. For me, having nontheistic faith is far better than having no faith.

Another problem with a nontheistic view of God is that it's not institutionally friendly. Trying to force this view on traditional churches would bring enormous pain and conflict. It's unfair, in my opinion, to ask congregations to jettison thousands of years of belief and tradition and embrace a dramatically different understanding about "God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." For the vast majority of churches, it is too big of an ask.

Even Bishop Spong understood this challenge. He wondered if his "cure" for modern Christianity (shifting from theistic to nontheistic theology) might kill it. However, he felt that a nontheistic shift was the only way Christianity and the church would survive in the long run. The jury will be out on this one for a long time to come.

For the time being, nontheistic faith can work well for individuals, including churchgoers who still find value in organized religion (in spite of its theistic theology, hymnology, and liturgy). But it's problematic to impose this view on congregations as a whole. The one exception would be new congregations who start out with a clearly

communicated nontheistic theology that members knowingly sign up for in advance.

A final weakness of nontheistic theology is that it can put clergy in an exceptionally difficult position. That's certainly been true in my experience. In retirement, I happily affirm a nontheistic view of God. For me it's the only viable faith option available. I find it life-giving, liberating, and meaningful. It sustains my soul in ways traditional religion no longer can. But unfortunately, I had to leave vocational ministry in order to fully embrace this view. Some clergy find ways to balance their nontheistic theology in their theistic church. But I could not.

Living in the Not Knowing

From 2007 through 2015, cable channel AMC produced a television show called ***Mad Men***. It told the story of a New York City advertising firm in the 1960s. When it first released, I watched several episodes, then stopped. At the time I felt the series featured shallow people looking for meaning in all the wrong places—especially affluence, alcohol, and adultery. However, during the long days of the pandemic, I gave ***Mad Men*** a second chance. I realized it had far more depth than I originally thought.

In one episode the two primary characters, Don and Peggy, engage in an interesting dialogue. Peggy feels nervous about a huge advertising pitch she has to make the next day. She asks her boss, a man named Don Draper, "Is this idea just right or not?" Don replies, "That's a tough one. You never know. That's just the job." Peggy said, "What's the job?" Don responds, "Living in the not knowing."

Don Draper was right. Life is always about "living in the not knowing." If we learned nothing else in the pandemic, we learned how unpredictable life can be, including our physical, financial, and emotional well-being. Of course, people hate not knowing. Ambiguity is not popular, especially in America.

So we try to create certainty. We work out at the gym to stay well. We save and invest in order to accumulate financial security. And we turn to religion to offer answers, comfort, and certainty. But certainty is a myth, even in spiritual matters. Especially in spiritual matters.

Although there's no shortage of religious leaders who proclaim certainty, it never rings true for me. One of the primary reasons I left conservative evangelical religion is because it offered too many answers, asked too few questions, and punished those who did.

The fact is, we are not God. We do not know everything. As the apostle Paul once said, "We see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). Therefore, black-and-white religion that has no room for uncertainty is both unhealthy and inauthentic. As one wise believer once said, "The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty." Rather than resisting ambiguity, spiritually mature people fully embrace it. They live joyfully in the "not knowing" concerning their specific beliefs about God, including matters around theism or nontheism.

Headed in the Right Direction

These days I enjoy reading stories to my grandchildren. One of my favorite children's books is E. B. White's classic tale, ***Stuart Little***. In this story a mouse-like character named Stuart goes on a great adventure, looking for his beloved friend, a bird named Margalo. The story ends with Stuart still searching for his friend. Did he ever find her? We never find out. All we learn is that Stuart "somehow felt he was headed in the right direction." E. B. White received a lot of grief about that ambiguous ending. He responded to the criticism by saying, "Life is essentially inconclusive."

After a lifetime of seeking to understand the nature of God, I have come to believe that a nontheistic life-force and energy-force concept of God is, in the words of Stuart Little, "headed in the right direction." However, I'll never know for certain if this is the best model of God for modern believers. But I'm OK with the uncertainty. After all, life (and faith) is all about "living in the not knowing." In matters of faith, ambiguity goes with the territory.

Chapter 9

I Still Love Jesus

Many years ago, in my late thirties, I seriously considered leaving the ministry. Fearful that I didn't have enough faith left in my spiritual tank to continue a religious vocation, I began exploring other options. While grappling with that weighty decision, I attended a clergy meeting at a nearby church. After the meeting concluded and the crowd dispersed, I walked into the historic sanctuary, hoping for a time of quiet reflection. However, instead of focusing on my vocational dilemma, I found myself drawn to the exquisite stained-glass windows. Upon closer inspection, I realized they told the story of Jesus.

Jesus in the Windows

- The window depicting his birth reminded me that Jesus was a real, flesh-and-blood human being.
- The window depicting his baptism reminded me of own baptism when I, like Jesus, was claimed as a beloved child of God.
- The window depicting his encounter with the woman at the well reminded me that Jesus offers living water for those who thirst.
- The window depicting him curing a child reminded me that Jesus is full of compassion and offers healing for our brokenness.
- The window depicting him blessing children reminded me of Jesus's tender love for the most vulnerable among us.
- The window depicting him praying in agony at the garden of Gethsemane reminded me that Jesus, like us, experienced fear and anxiety.
- The window depicting him suffering on the cross reminded me that Jesus understands and enters human pain.
- The window depicting his resurrection reminded me that even in death and darkness, the life and love of Jesus ultimately prevail.

As I slowly walked through the sanctuary looking at the windows, tears began to flow down my face. The stained-glass images of Jesus's life moved me to the core of my being. They reminded me that the Jesus story, regardless of its literal historical accuracy, is the defining story of my life, providing me with meaning, purpose, and hope. In spite of all my religious doubts, I knew in that moment that I still loved Jesus, still belonged to him, and still wanted to serve and follow him. That epiphany added over twenty years to my shelf life as a clergyperson. I've never regretted the extension.

Why Are You Still a Christian?

I recently engaged in a spirited email conversation with a self-avowed atheist. After reading several articles on my Doubter's Parish website, he wanted to ask some questions. We exchanged a volley of emails back and forth, respectfully explaining our positions. As you might expect, we agreed on some issues and disagreed on others. Near the end of our correspondence, he asked, "Given your doubts about traditional faith and your disappointments with institutional religion, why are you still a Christian?" Without hesitation I replied, "Because I still love Jesus."

From the Great Passion Play to Jesus Christ Superstar

However, my love for Jesus doesn't mean I affirm traditional Christology. Even during my early years of faith, I sometimes struggled to believe supernatural stories about Christ's divinity. For example, during college, I served as a youth minister in England. Unfortunately, it was England, Arkansas! During summer vacation I took my youth group to a performance of ***The Great Passion Play*** in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, which reenacts the final week of Jesus's life.

But instead of feeling inspired by the play, the performance felt contrived, campy, and cheesy. It included angels, earthquakes, supernatural miracles, the resuscitated corpse of Jesus, and dead people crawling out of their graves upon Christ's resurrection. Perhaps worst of all, the play ended with Jesus's bodily ascension into the sky, a totally impossible belief in an age of modern cosmology. The whole affair seemed like a fairy tale, unreal and unbelievable.

Several months later I watched a performance of ***Jesus Christ Superstar***, which began with Judas doubting Jesus's divinity and ended with the crucifixion. Unlike ***The Great Passion Play***, which depicted a totally divine Christ, ***Jesus Christ Superstar*** depicted a totally human Jesus. Although I felt guilty about it at the time, I instinctively suspected that ***Jesus Christ Superstar*** was a lot closer to the truth than ***The Great Passion Play***.

Where Do You Stand on the Virgin Birth?

Mark Twain once said, "Having faith is believing something you just know ain't true." But it doesn't have to be that way. It's possible to love Jesus without shutting down your mind. For example, consider the virgin birth. Although traditionalists believe it's a nonnegotiable doctrine, most religious scholars and progressive Christians don't take it literally.

It's highly unlikely Jesus was born of a virgin. Not just because it's such an incredulous belief, which it is. Or that stories about virgin births were commonplace in the ancient world, which they were. But because the Bible itself raises questions about its historical veracity.

For example, Jesus never said a word about the virgin birth. It's not recorded by the apostle Paul. The earliest Gospel (Mark) doesn't mention it. Neither does the Gospel of John. Their silence on the matter is a strong indicator that the virgin birth is a theological construct, not a historical reality.

I recently heard a joke about a conservative church member who doubted her pastor's orthodoxy. Instead, she suspected he held liberal beliefs. So she confronted him one day after church and asked, "Where do you stand on the virgin birth?" He responded, "I stand with Jesus, the apostle Paul, the Gospel of Mark, and the Gospel of John." Satisfied with what she heard, she responded, "I'm glad to hear it," and walked away. And if you didn't get the joke, go back and reread the previous paragraph.

Deconstructing Divinity

The point I'm trying to make is that following Jesus doesn't require mental ascent to

implausible beliefs. And, for a growing number of people in the twenty-first century, traditional doctrines about the divinity of Christ have become impossible to believe.

For over two centuries now, biblical scholars have engaged in exhaustive research on the historical Jesus. Their overall consensus is that while Jesus spoke of God and pointed to God, he never claimed to ***be*** God. Instead, as the earliest Gospels record, Jesus repeatedly rejected claims of divinity. In spite of Jesus's reticence to accept a divine identity, his followers eventually declared he was God. Not by any deceitful motivation. In Jesus, they saw and felt the presence of God in ways they had never experienced before. So it was only natural that in the decades following his death, they came to believe in his divinity.

It's important to remember that the early followers of Jesus lived in a world totally unlike our own. In that day people believed God constantly intervened in the world. Under every rock lay an angel or a demon. Their world lived and breathed supernaturalism. So when they described Jesus, they did so in the only language they knew how to use—theistic supernaturalism.

Given that ancient worldview, and the fact that the Gospels were written four to seven decades after Jesus died, it's easy to understand how belief in a divine Christ took root and evolved. As a result, fantastic stories emerged about a virgin-born man who made water into wine, walked on the sea, raised the dead, rose from the grave, and ascended into the sky. In light of these realities, many modern-day Christians, myself included, have deconstructed Jesus's divinity and resurrected his humanity.

Reconstructing Divinity with the Help of Two Heretic Bishops

As noted above, I began having doubts about Christ's divinity in college. When I shared those concerns with my advisor, he handed me a little book called ***Honest to God*** by a "heretical" English bishop named John A. T. Robinson. In many ways that book saved my faith. It taught me that doubt was not the enemy of faith but part of faith. And it taught me that it was OK to ask hard questions about Christianity, including inquiries concerning the divinity of Christ.

Although Bishop Robinson rejected belief in a divine Christ, he had an extremely high view of Jesus, whom he called "the man for others" and "the human face of God." He affirmed in ***Honest to God*** that "Jesus is the man for others, the one in whom Love has completely taken over, the one who is utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of all being." While Bishop Robinson clearly understood Jesus to be human and not divine, he was also able to say that Jesus "was more than just a man. . . . He was a window into God at work."

Decades later, I read another book by a "heretical" American bishop named John Shelby Spong called ***Why Christianity Must Change or Die***. Like ***Honest to God***, Bishop Spong's book deeply impacted my life. Although Bishop Spong, like Bishop Robinson, rejected a divine Christ, he loved, celebrated, and followed the human Jesus who "lived fully, loved wastefully, and had the courage to be all God created him to be."

Both of these "heretical" bishops taught me that modern Christians can love and follow Jesus without affirming ancient doctrines they cannot authentically profess. I learned from these men that deconstructing Jesus's divinity does not diminish his uniqueness or his influence upon our lives. In fact, the exact opposite is true. A flesh-and-blood human Jesus is far more compelling than a legendary mythological Christ.

However, it should be noted that it took a long time to arrive at this conclusion. In spite of long-standing Christological questions, including doubts about Jesus's virgin birth and supernatural miracles, I mostly affirmed belief in "Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord" (from the second line of the Apostles' Creed). Only at the end of my ministerial vocation did I finally—and reluctantly—shift my faith from a divine Christ to a human Jesus.

Therefore, I'm deeply sensitive to the fact that deconstructing Christ's divinity and reconstructing Jesus's humanity will not appeal to all (or even most) Christians. Many will find it offensive. Others will find it inadequate. But for a growing number of progressive Christians, it's the only way to make sense of Jesus in the twenty-first century. And, at least for me, it's more than enough.

Are the Stories They Tell Us in Church True?

I recently heard a story about an extremely bright seven-year-old girl and her mother having an important theological conversation. During the Christmas season, the girl played with her family's nativity set. While rearranging the figures of Mary and Joseph, wise men and shepherds, and animals and angels, she asked her mother, "Are the stories they tell us in church true?" What a great question! I wish more people felt the freedom to ask these kinds of difficult questions. And I wish more churches would welcome such questions.

The best she could, this theologically astute mother explained to her daughter that a story can be true without being literal. She told her, "When Jesus was born, a choir of angels probably didn't sing in the sky. And a bright star probably didn't hover over the manger. However, on that first Christmas, a real baby named Jesus was born. And when he grew up, he taught us how to live and love." In short, she tried to communicate to her daughter that while many of the stories they tell us in church are not literally true, they are full of important truths.

These days, stories about a divine Christ being born of a virgin, walking on water, healing the blind, and raising people from the dead don't hold much interest for me. However, stories about a spiritually alive human Jesus who loved sinners, extended grace, welcomed outsiders, touched lepers, blessed children, exhibited compassion, engaged in acts of kindness, challenged toxic religion, and fought for social justice deeply move me.

Singing Songs of Jesus

Throughout my life, especially during times of struggle, I have often found encouragement and strength from songs about Jesus. For example, when I was still in the Southern Baptist Convention and the fundamentalists took over, I felt disoriented, lost, frightened, and vulnerable. At the lowest ebb of that awful chapter, I went for a daylong hike in the woods. Along the way I stopped for a drink of water and a rest. While sitting on a fallen tree limb, I looked up and saw shafts of sunlight streaming through the forest. I began to feel deep emotions welling up in my soul, leading to one

of the most profound spiritual moments of my life.

In the midst of extreme anxiety and uncertainty about my future, I stood up, lifted up my hands, and sang, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.” In ways I cannot fully explain, I felt the presence of Jesus with me, embracing me in his love. That profound mystical moment renewed my spirit and gave me the strength I needed to push through those challenging days.

About twenty years ago, when praise choruses were all the rage, I enjoyed singing a song called “I Love You Lord.” It’s basically a love song to Jesus. Since then, as my theology has evolved, I’m not as comfortable with the lyrics, which affirm traditional theistic beliefs in a supernatural divine Christ. And yet, on an emotional level, I still resonate with the song and occasionally sing it during times of reflection, prayer, and solitude. Why? Because even after all these years, and all my doubts, and all my “sophisticated” theology, I still love Jesus, including his example, teachings, and mission.

I Love the Example of Jesus

Unlike many people, Jesus never needed to say, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Instead, he fully lived out his values. Although I no longer believe in a traditional divine Christ, I do believe in the “human face of God” Jesus and seek to follow his example.

I believe in Jesus’s example of love, service, and compassion. I believe in Jesus’s example of inclusion and grace. I believe in Jesus’s example of respecting women. I believe in Jesus’s example of breaking down human barriers and prejudices. I believe in Jesus’s example of forgiving people who hurt him. I believe in Jesus’s example of seeking justice in the world. And I believe in Jesus’s example of caring for the poor and marginalized.

I Love the Teachings of Jesus

Most people agree that Jesus was one of the greatest teachers the world has ever known. In the great commandment, Jesus taught us to love God and neighbor. In the Golden Rule, Jesus taught us to treat others the way we want them to treat us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us ethical (and practical) guidelines for living. And in the parables, Jesus taught us the mysteries of God. Although his lessons aren't always easy to follow, when we do, they lead to a well-lived life, as the following example illustrates.

The eighth chapter of the Gospel of John records a famous story about a woman caught in the act of adultery. Intolerant and indignant religious leaders dragged her to Jesus and said, "In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (v. 5 NIV). In that dramatic moment, Jesus taught one of the most important lessons of his ministry. He said to those legalistic, self-righteous and judgmental religious teachers, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7 NIV). If people followed this remarkable teaching of Jesus, the world would be a far better place.

I Love the Mission of Jesus

Jesus's primary mission in life was not to start a new religion, or encourage people to accept him as "their personal Lord and Savior," or get people to worship him, or to build a religious institution. Instead, Jesus's core mission was to advance the kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10 NIV).

In a nutshell, the kingdom of God is what the world would look like if God called all the shots. As followers of Jesus, our job is to help make that happen to the best of our limited ability. Therefore, modern-day believers and faith communities are called by Jesus to engage in kingdom-building endeavors, including caring for God's creation, ending racism, defeating poverty, advocating for peace, and seeking justice. Attempting to implement Jesus's vision of God's kingdom on earth is a mission worthy of our lives.

Last Scene

There's much about Jesus that we do not know. In many ways, his life is shrouded in mystery and legend. Therefore, the thoughts I've shared in this chapter are tentative, and some of my conclusions may be faulty. What I do know is that Jesus is the central figure in my life. He still has a profound and compelling call upon me, and my heart's desire is to faithfully follow him.

Several years ago, I watched the 2016 film ***Silence***. The movie tells the story of a seventeenth-century priest who did missionary work in Japan. For years he struggled with the silence of God in the midst of great suffering and persecution. He grew weary of trying to advance Christianity in Japan with little success.

Finally—primarily to save his congregation from deadly torture by government persecution—he publicly renounced his faith. He left the priesthood, married, and pressed on with a secular life, although you wondered if he still secretly held an affinity for Jesus.

At the end of the film, the ex-priest died. His body was placed in a large wooden casket. Before they took his body for cremation, his wife placed a small crucifix in the palm of his hand, one given to him when he first arrived as a missionary in Japan. As the cremation fire began to burn, the last image of the movie was the crucifix in the hand of the former priest.

I wept as I watched that scene. Like that ex-priest, I will take Jesus to the grave with me, grateful for his life-giving impact on my life.

Why am I still a Christian? Because I still love Jesus. And I always will.

Chapter 10

I Still Appreciate the Church

I've lived in Hawaii twice in my life. First as a child when my father was stationed at Hickam Air Force Base. Second when I served as the pastor of a Baptist church in Honolulu. So when ***The Descendants*** released in 2011, I immediately went to see it. The movie, set in Hawaii, starred George Clooney and earned five Oscar nominations, including Best Picture.

My Pain and My Joy

In this moving and engaging film, Clooney played the role of an attorney named Matt King. Tragically, his wife Elizabeth suffered a serious boating accident and slipped into a coma. The doctors determined that the coma was irreversible. Since Elizabeth had a living will, the hospital was required to remove all life support and allow her to die. In the midst of all this trauma, Matt learned that his wife had been having an affair. So he had to come to terms not only with her impending death but also her marital infidelity.

Before they turned off life support, Matt went to the hospital to say goodbye to his wife. In a deeply emotional scene, he kissed his comatose wife for the last time. Then he tenderly said to her, "Goodbye, Elizabeth. Goodbye, my love, my friend, my pain, my joy. Goodbye."

Although that poignant scene depicts the complex relationship of marriage, I've often thought about it in terms of my life in the church. Unlike Clooney's character, I have not yet said a final "goodbye" to institutional religion. However, like Clooney's wife Elizabeth, the church has been both "my pain" and "my joy." I've already shared some of the pain in previous chapters, both in the evangelical and mainline church. In this chapter I'd like to tell you about some of the joy. And there's plenty to share.

I Am Grateful for the Gifts

At the end of her book ***Freeing Jesus***, Diana Butler Bass expressed thanks to

numerous people and institutions she's been associated with, including the conservative church, college, and seminary of her youth. Although she no longer lives in that religious world, she still appreciates the contributions they made to her life. She says, "These communities shaped my faith at important junctures of young adulthood. We came to have many disagreements, yet I bear you no ill will. I am grateful for the gifts you gave me when I most needed them."

I concur with Bass. In spite of my disappointments and disagreements with institutional religion, I still appreciate the many gifts they gave me, as the following three journal entries indicate. The first, written sixteen years after leaving the Southern Baptist Convention, provides a brief reflection on my life in the SBC. I penned the second entry during one of my United Methodist pastorates. And I wrote the last entry just a few weeks ago.

- "The SBC didn't just hurt me and take away my vocational opportunities. They also gave me some precious gifts. Most importantly, they introduced me to Jesus, who transformed my life and continues to do so. They became the family my dysfunctional childhood family could not be. They loved me. They affirmed me. They educated me. They gave me a meaningful vocation as a minister of the gospel. And they gave me exceptional opportunities of service at a young age. In the big picture of my life, the SBC blessed me far more than it wounded me."

- "I finished reading ***The Memory of Old Jack*** today, a moving novel about a farmer who found great joy in his vocation working the land. I'm no farmer. But like Jack, I also have a vocation. I am a minister of the gospel. I'm only a tiny player in a far larger story. Still, I'm part of a two-thousand-year-old tradition. I get to preach hope, lead worship, baptize children and adults, administer Holy Communion, help lead churches to fulfill their mission, pray with the sick and troubled, represent a God of love and mercy, officiate funerals, perform weddings, and on it goes. In spite of all my flaws, I have the overwhelming privilege of being part of this amazing work. This is my place, my niche, my calling, my vocation. And I take great joy in it, marvel in it, and thank God for the gift."

- "In spite of its significant flaws, the church gave me life in every way possible:

spiritually, emotionally, educationally, vocationally, financially, and relationally. Everything I am and have I owe to God's church. I don't ever want to forget that."

"From Time to Time We've Shown Ourselves Capable"

In his book ***Thoughtful Christianity***, Ben Daniel recounts a long list of awful things the church has done throughout history (and continues to do today). Then he writes, "But not always." He adds, "From time to time we've shown ourselves capable."

Daniel's assessment is correct. Sometimes the church gets it right. And it's important to remember that. For example, over the centuries the church (at least parts of it) founded colleges, established hospitals, created art, started charities, alleviated suffering, ended child labor, challenged slavery, and inspired the Civil Rights Movement.

Even today, the church provides meaning, purpose, and hope for millions of believers. It builds significant relationships and faith communities. It gives people a sense of transcendence. It motivates people to care for others. It promotes generosity, responsible ethics, and high ideals. And it inspires music, art, and beauty. That's not always the case, as we've already noted. But oftentimes it's true. And that part of the church story needs to be celebrated.

Stage Four Faith Communities

Of course, that doesn't change the fact that drastic changes need to occur in organized religion. As mentioned earlier, every branch of the church—evangelical, mainline, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic—is seriously offtrack. I'm not sure it can (or even should) survive in its current form. A good case can be made that today's church needs to die off (which it seems to be doing) so it can be resurrected into something healthier. Thankfully, a creative group of capable folks are dreaming and working to create these kinds of life-giving faith communities.

For example, in his book ***Faith after Doubt***, Brian McLaren describes what he calls "stage-four" faith. According to McLaren, stage-four faith is post doctrinal. It's not

about religious beliefs but about living a life of love. This expression of faith minimizes doctrines, embraces paradox, exudes humility, welcomes diversity, cares about the common good, and seeks to live out "faith that expresses itself in love." According to McLaren, stage-four faith communities need to be "big on action, big on love, small on beliefs, and small on bureaucracy."

Unfortunately, few established churches are willing to make the shift to "stage-four" faith communities. But some will. And a growing number of new churches seek to emulate this model. I'm no expert on this subject. All my pastorates were in traditional churches. But I do know this. If a "stage-four" church existed in my community, I'd be part of it. It's beyond the scope of this book to lay out principles and strategies for a new model of doing church. But for those visionary leaders trying to create places like this, I'm rooting for you.

A Flawed, Human, but Glorious Christmas Eve Service

While working on this chapter, I recalled an incident from my first United Methodist pastorate. At the time, I was engaged in PhD studies at Vanderbilt University. My church was preparing for our Christmas Eve candlelight service, one of my favorite worship services of the year.

Since my previous pastorates were large-membership churches, I never gave much thought to all the practical details of a Christmas Eve service. Staff and trained volunteers took care of everything. This church, although small, had a well-functioning worship team. So I assumed they had everything in order. It proved an erroneous assumption. I should have been far more involved in the preparation details.

To begin with, we didn't make enough bulletins for the large crowd that attended. So, three minutes before the service began, I found myself in the church office running off additional bulletins while simultaneously putting on my clergy robe, hooking up my wireless lapel microphone, and talking to church members.

When the service began, several minutes late, I realized the PA system had not been activated. During the opening song I had to walk to the back of the church and turn it

on. A moment later, I realized that the Christmas tree lights were off. I motioned to the ushers to turn them on, but they couldn't understand what I was trying to say to them. So while the liturgist prayed the opening prayer, I slipped over to the tree to plug it in. Unfortunately, it was a short prayer. After the liturgist said "Amen," the congregation chuckled as they saw me bent over the tree, trying to get the plug into the socket. On top of that, a baby was crying—loudly—and I could barely hear myself talk.

A few moments later I led the congregation in the passing of the peace. Although I wasn't feeling very peaceful, I said, "The peace of Christ be with you." The congregation responded, "And also with you." During the greeting time that followed, one of our ushers walked up to the platform to speak to me. How nice, I thought. She came to offer me the peace of Christ. However, she didn't say anything about the peace of Christ. Instead, she said, "Martin, we don't have any candles!"

You need to remember this was a Christmas Eve *candlelight* worship service. At that point I about lost it. Still, worship still had to go on. So while the liturgist read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke and the congregation sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem," the ushers frantically looked for our Christmas Eve candles in the huge closet at the back of the sanctuary. When they finally found them, the lead usher looked at me, grinned from ear to ear, and made a dramatic fist pump into the air. By that point in the service, I was giving a brief devotional. As I spoke, I watched the ushers place those little round paper protectors on the bottom of each candle (to keep people from being burned by dripping wax.)

The congregation had no clue what was happening. They could not see all the drama unfolding behind them. However, from my perch, I could see every painful detail, including the ushers running out of candle protectors. I watched as one of them dashed out of the sanctuary. A moment later she returned, victoriously holding a stack of construction paper she procured from the children's department. She began cutting out circles of construction paper and poking holes in the middle to serve as homemade candle-wax protectors.

At this point, the crisis had been averted, and my anxiety had died down. It was

almost time to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, and I looked forward to this special part of the service. However, when I looked at the Communion table, I noticed that the chalice was empty. Nobody has placed grape juice into the cup! I was mortified. Thankfully, the congregation was still singing the Communion preparation song. I motioned to one of the ushers to come forward, and, in a whisper, explained the situation. She quietly went to the altar, picked up the chalice, and headed toward the kitchen to get the grape juice.

At that point I began the Great Thanksgiving for the Holy Sacrament of Communion. As I said, “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty,” I watched the usher return from the kitchen with a jar of Welch’s grape juice. She carefully poured it into the chalice. Another usher continued to cut out little candle protectors from construction paper, poke holes in the middle, and place them on the candles.

The chalice, now full of grape juice, was ceremonially brought to the Communion table just in time for the consecration of the elements. People in the congregation assumed this was a planned addition to the service, a way to emphasis the sacredness of the moment. Ironically, the grape juice mistake added to the beauty of the experience.

A few minutes later, people started coming forward for Holy Communion. Young and old, married and single, happy and hurting, person after person received homemade pieces of bread and dipped them into the chalice. While I said, “The body of Christ, given for you,” and the liturgist said, “The blood of Christ given for you,” a soloist sang beautiful Christmas music. I felt an overwhelming sense of God’s presence and community connection.

Finally, the service was almost over. Right before the lighting of the candles and the singing of “Silent Night,” the ushers passed out the candles to the congregation, who thought we planned it this way. *How nice*, they thought, *the ushers waited until the very end of the service, when we actually needed them, to hand out the candles.* Little did they know!

By now all the candles were lit and the congregation was singing “Silent Night.” Almost on cue, the crying baby started screaming its lungs out again. But it only added to the ambiance. After all, we were celebrating the birth of a child.

As the congregation continued to sing “Silent Night,” I walked to the back of the sanctuary in order to greet people after the service. After safely turning off my microphone, the ushers and I looked at one another, and, as hard as we tried not to, we began to laugh. Thankfully, the organ, the singing of the congregation, and the screaming baby drowned out our laughter.

When we got to the final stanza of “Silent Night,” the laughing subsided, the baby quit crying, the lights dimmed, and candlelight filled the room. As I looked at that beautiful scene, I thought about the events of the past hour. We didn’t have enough bulletins, we started late, the PA system wasn’t turned on, the tree lights were off, we didn’t have candles ready, we ran out of candle protectors, there was no grape juice in the Communion chalice, and a baby was screaming its lungs out.

And yet, in spite of all that, we still had a profound experience of worship and Christian community. I thought to myself, *This is the church of Jesus Christ. With all of its flaws. With all of its humanity. And with all of its glory*. I felt deeply grateful to be a minister, even at this small, struggling, student pastorate. It was one of the most joyful moments (of many) in my pastoral life.

A Blessing and a Limp

Like every minister I know, I have a love-hate relationship with organized religion. However, given my critique of institutional religion in part 1 of this book, it felt essential to include this chapter on some of the positives. The failures of Christianity, while real and disappointing, are only part of the story.

A few months ago, I wrote a long entry in my journal about my life and career in the church. I noted, once again, that in spite of its many flaws and the wounds it inflicted on me, overall, the church deeply blessed me. I ended the journal entry by saying, “Most of my life in the church was good. And a lot of it was great.”

When I think about my five decades in the life of the church, I often remember the strange story in Genesis 32 about Jacob wrestling all night with God. During the wrestling match, Jacob asked God for a blessing. And he got his blessing. But he also got wounded. The next morning, when that bizarre encounter came to an end, Jacob walked away with a limp. But he also walked away with a blessing. That's been my experience with the church.

Whatever my future relationship with institutional religion turns out to be (the jury is still out on that), I will always be grateful to the church for giving me a blessing. Even with the limp. The gain was definitely worth the pain.

Chapter 11

I Still Experience Christian Community

I recently enjoyed a long lunch conversation with an old friend. Like me, he's a retired clergyperson. Since we had not seen each other in several years, we spent a lot of time catching up on each other's lives.

Both of us confessed that we were currently "on sabbatical" from institutional religion. We both occasionally attend church. But like many other retired ministers (over 40% in an informal survey I took last year), neither one of us is connected to a local congregation in any significant way. We both wondered how long our "sabbaticals" would last. In a moment of candor and transparency, he said, "I'm not sure my church sabbatical will ever end."

Where Are You Finding Christian Community?

At that point my friend broached an important question. He asked me, "So, where are you finding Christian community these days?" I paused for a moment to think about his question. Then I said, "Actually, I'm finding Christian community in the same places I always have. I'm finding it in my family, among my friends, and in my clergy support groups."

Most churches consider themselves a family. There's a lot of truth in that metaphor. And a lot of beauty. Perhaps the best contribution churches make is connecting people together in meaningful relationships. And I've certainly experienced that.

However, as a pastor, there's always a bit of distance between you and the congregation. You are never fully "one of them." Your unique role makes you slightly different. Plus, preachers come and go while congregations remain. Therefore, as a paid religious worker, your tent is always pitched slightly outside the main camp. So while I always enjoyed being part of the church "family" in my various pastorates, my most significant Christian relationships existed beyond the local church. And I still enjoy those relationships in retirement.

I Find Christian Community in My Family

Early in my ministry, a wise mentor told me, “Always remember, Martin, you are not married to the church. You are married to your wife.” It proved wise counsel. Although I always loved my congregations and gave them a lot of time and attention, I never forgot that my primary relational commitment was to my wife and family. And in that setting, I found important Christian community.

My wife and I married during college. We’ve been together for forty-seven years. Like every couple we’ve had our ups and down and joys and struggles. And it’s not always easy being “a preacher’s wife” (or husband). But my wife was always supportive of my religious vocation, as well as my life in general, for which I am deeply grateful.

One evening, after my wife and I attended a dance together, I wrote in my journal, “I dance with that woman. I live with that woman. I’ve had children with that woman. I fight with that woman. I laugh with that woman. I cry with that woman. I love that woman. And I’m grateful to that woman, and to God, for our life together.” My spouse has been my primary source of emotional and spiritual support for nearly five decades.

I also find support from my children, grandchildren, and other family members. For example, decades ago, when I was deeply struggling with my work as a Southern Baptist minister, I walked into my church office and noticed that my young daughter had written a message on my blackboard. It said, “Who Is Martin Thielen? By Laura Thielen.” She then wrote the following acrostic:

M = Marvelous

A = Awesome

R = Radiant

T = Tremendous

I = Incredible

N = Nice

During that challenging time in my life, my young daughter's sweet message on the blackboard felt like a "balm in Gilead." Thirty years later, my daughter's daughter and I watched people parasailing at the beach in Destin, Florida. I told my granddaughter I could never do that. She asked why. I told her, "Because I'm terrified of heights." She said, "That's OK, I could ride with you and hold your hand."

I could share hundreds of examples of finding strength and encouragement from my family. I could also relay examples where they challenged me when needed and held me accountable. In short, my family has served as my primary spiritual community throughout my life and ministry. They have enriched my life (and work) and added great joy to my world.

I Find Christian Community in Individual Friendships

Ecclesiastes wisely said, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help" (4:9–10 NRSVUE). In this familiar text, Ecclesiastes tells us that we need friends for the journey. That's certainly been the case in my life.

An important part of my Christian community over the years has been individual friendships. Although I could give dozens of examples, both past and current, I'm only going to mention one of them in this chapter.

For thirty years, before his death three years ago, Jim was my best friend. I first met him at a writing conference at a Baptist seminary. I was in my early thirties and hungry to publish. Jim was an editor at the Baptist Sunday School Board. At that conference, Jim was kind enough to purchase two articles from me with the promise of more in the future. When I arrived at the Board two years later, Jim and I became fast and close friends.

I still vividly remember the first time we ate lunch together. On the way back to work, as we neared the massive downtown facility of the Sunday School Board, he said, "Just remember Martin, in this huge pile of manure (he used a more colorful word), you and I

are just tiny little turds." We laughed about that statement many times over the years.

Jim and I lived through the glory and the guts of SBC denominational work. We had similar life stories. Our spiritual journeys were almost identical. And we enjoyed three decades of shared history. It's no wonder we became such close friends.

About a year after Jim and I reluctantly left denominational work (we left the Board the same week), we both struggled with our new jobs in local SBC churches. We knew we no longer fit in the evangelical world but weren't sure how to transition out. One day he called, and we talked for about two hours. We didn't resolve our dilemma. But near the end of the call, he said, "I just needed to hear a friendly voice." I replied, "So did I." Then I asked, "Jim, when does life get easy?" He said, "Well, I'm forty-five years old, and it hasn't happened yet!"

A few months later we discussed our finances. We knew everything about each other's financial assets, although there wasn't much to know! At the end of that conversation, Jim told me, "Your friendship is one of the most valuable assets I'll ever have." Many years later, a few months before he died, he said, "I love you like a brother."

Years ago, when I was debating, back and forth, whether to resign my Honolulu pastorate and enter the Vanderbilt PhD program, Jim forcefully said, "Martin, you have a hard time putting down a period. It's time for you to make a decision." And he was right. My waffling was leading nowhere. That tough love friendship helped me make one of the most important (and best) decisions of my life.

Many years later, in early retirement, when I was debating whether to launch Doubter's Parish Jim said, "You are overthinking this. Just do it and see how it goes." I took his advice and the project went great. Since then, my work with Doubter's Parish has become, in essence, my new vocation. The only difference is that I don't get paid anymore! Jim played an important role in my decision to press forward with this life-enriching ministry.

Space limitations don't permit me to share how much Jim and I supported each

other during our long and difficult transition from traditional to nontraditional theology and from institutional to noninstitutional-based spirituality. But I would never have successfully navigated that journey without his constant companionship. After leaving the Board, because of the geographical distance between us, we only saw each other in person about once per year. But we talked, emailed, or texted each other several times a week for nearly three decades.

When Jim died by suicide (completely unexpectedly) in the fall of 2021, I felt absolutely devastated. My closest friend and spiritual companion was gone and never coming back. It took a long time to work through the pain, anger, confusion, and grief of that loss.

One of the things that helped during that awful time was listening to a song (over and over again) from the musical ***Wicked*** called "For Good." Although it evoked deep emotions, including pain, it also brought me comfort, especially the words, "Because I knew you, I have been changed for good." Knowing and loving Jim (and being loved by him) changed my life for good. He was a huge part of my life story. And I'll always be grateful for his friendship. It was an example of Christian community at its best.

I Find Christian Community in Friendship Groups

Not only do I find Christian community in individual friendships; I also find it in groups of friends. For example, in our mid-forties, my wife and I belonged to a group of about ten friends that everybody called "the gang." Some belonged to our church and some didn't. We gathered every Sunday evening for four years to share good food and even better conversation.

One of the things the group often joked about was that when it came to money, there are only two types of people. Those who "save for tomorrow" and those who "live for today." When almost everyone in the gang bought new cars about the same time, I razzed them without mercy about "living for today rather than saving for tomorrow." I told them, "One day you'll be coming to me for a loan."

About a year later, our son, who had just graduated from college, needed a car. So

I gave him mine and bought myself a new Toyota Camry. The gang harassed me no end about how I was “living for today rather than saving for tomorrow.” At our next gathering they presented me with a certificate. It said, “Congratulations to Martin Thielen, the newest member of the Living for Today Club.” I still have the certificate.

These days my wife and I are part of another group of friends. We often gather at one another’s homes or at local restaurants. A few months ago a member of the group sent all of us a text. She said, “It’s church night. All are invited for friendship and conversation.” A couple of hours later all six of us gathered at a local restaurant for a good meal and an engaging conversation. And my friend was right. It felt like “church night.”

Of course, our group is not a literal church. We don’t sing hymns, recite creeds, take up an offering, or listen to a sermon. But we have significant spiritual conversations. After our gathering that evening I wrote in my journal, “This group, along with my two clergy groups (which I’ll mention in a moment) have indeed become my ‘church’ these days. And I’m grateful to God for them.”

I Find Christian Community in Clergy Groups

Although I’m retired from parish life, I’m still connected to clergy groups. I learned early on as a young clergyperson that I could not survive (much less thrive) in ministry on my own, professionally or personally. So, throughout my religious vocation, I either joined or created a minister support group.

For example, I once served as a pastor in a severely economically distressed community. Several major industries closed down almost overnight. People left town by the thousands. Anxiety and anger consumed the community, including the churches. Every congregation in town was hemorrhaging members, money, and morale.

Having a group of clergy friends who understood that environment made it possible to weather the storm without drowning. We even managed to produce a good bit of laughter. The group gathered every Wednesday morning at 11:00 for dialogue and

support followed by lunch. Although we ate at a local meat and three, it tasted like manna in the wilderness.

Today I'm part of two clergy support groups. One is a small group of United Methodist pastors across middle Tennessee (both active and retired) who have been together for decades. We still gather on a regular basis. Last year we took a road trip together to Perdido Key, Florida. We hung out at the beach, ate seafood at Peg Leg Petes, toured Fort Pickens, and watched the US Navy Blue Angels fly. I love these guys like brothers. We've helped one another through a lot of hard times, and we've celebrated with one another through a lot of good times.

My local clergy group consists of seven retired progressive clergypersons. We gather regularly in one another's homes to support one another on our mutual journey of retirement, aging, and faith. We call ourselves the AOP. That stands for "Agnostic Old Preachers." The title is tongue-in-cheek. All of us still believe in God. However, we harbor serious doubts about traditional doctrines and institutional religion. Our faith, which is often unorthodox, embraces a huge amount of ambiguity.

It's not a stretch to say that the AOP has become a "house church" for me and the other men in the group. It's a safe and sacred place to be honest, transparent, authentic, and vulnerable about life and faith. In truth, it's more "church" than traditional church ever was for any of us. The Agnostic Old Preachers group has become a significant element of my spiritual journey, and I'm grateful to be a part of this unique Christian community.

The Only Thing that Really Matters

When I wrote my book ***Searching for Happiness***, I did some research on the longest-running happiness study in human history. The study began in 1938 at Harvard University. It continued for over seventy-five years. During the study, researchers followed Harvard graduates through college, WWII, work, marriage, divorce, parenthood, grandparenthood, old age, and death. Near the end of this unique study, the project director was asked, "What was learned from this seventy-year-long study on happiness?" He responded, "We learned that the only thing that really matters in life

are your relationships with other people."

Even Jesus Needed Friends

Jesus understood this truth. For example, he nurtured close individual friendships with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He also devoted several years of his life to building a small group of disciples. Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus was not self-sufficient. He knew he couldn't accomplish his work alone. So he gathered a group of twelve disciples to join him. For three years, they worked, traveled, prayed, laughed, cried, and sometimes argued together. Those twelve men became Jesus's closest friends. They became an important part of his life.

My friend's inquiry, "Where are you finding Christian community?" is a crucial question for every person of faith. A lot of people find Christian (or spiritual) community in institutional religion, and I celebrate that. Others, like me, find it in family relationships and friendships, both individually and in small groups. Other people find Christian (or spiritual) community in a host of other venues including civic groups, food panty ministry teams, church softball leagues, Habitat for Humanity work crews, affinity groups, support groups, and even pickleball groups. But one way or another, to sustain our souls, we must find friends for the journey.

Lesson from a Sandcastle

I once heard a story about a rabbi who went to the beach for vacation. As he sat on the beach, he watched two children playing in the sand. They worked hard building an elaborate sandcastle by the water's edge, with gates, towers, and even a moat. They had almost completed their sandcastle when a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. The rabbi expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by the loss of all their hard work. But the children surprised him. Instead of crying, they held each other's hands, laughed a big belly laugh, and sat down to build another castle.

The rabbi said he learned an important lesson from those children that day. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spent so much time and energy

creating, are built on sand. Sooner or later a wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh and rebuild.

Chapter 12

I Still Attempt to Live a Christian Life

Like many others, I enjoyed the fascinating Cold War TV drama, ***The Americans***. The show depicted a Russian couple living as spies in America. After their daughter began attending a progressive church, the mother initiated several conversations with the pastor. In one scene, he could tell she was struggling with something, so he encouraged her to pray for guidance. She said, "What if you don't believe in God, or religion, or prayer?" He responded, "None of those things matter. All that matters is how we treat each other."

Plenty of religious people would take issue with this fictional pastor's unorthodox views. And a lot of them would consider it heresy. But his comments point to an important truth. At its core, authentic spirituality is not about beliefs. It's about behavior. And that insight, more than anything else, brought resolution to my decades-long spiritual struggle.

An End to Religious Angst

As noted throughout this book, I've long grappled with spiritual angst, especially around traditional beliefs and institutional religion. For years I agonized over questions like, *Is God personal? Does God intervene in human affairs? Do miracles occur? Does prayer make any difference? Is there life after death? And was Jesus really divine?* I also grappled with the dark underbelly of institutional religion, as I've shared in previous chapters.

Ultimately, these theological and institutional struggles resulted in my early retirement as a minister. Although that resolved my vocational dilemma, it did not solve my religious angst, which continued unabated.

However, over the past few years, I have made a major spiritual breakthrough. Like the pastor in ***The Americans***, I've finally come to realize that authentic faith has little to do with religious doctrines and institutions. Instead, it's all about how we live.

This insight hit me as I reread the Gospels. Freed from vocational restraints, I was able to fully see (for the first time) that Jesus cared little about traditional religious trappings. For example, when he called his first disciples, Jesus didn't say a word about religion. He simply said, "Follow me." And his great commandment (to love God and neighbor), his Golden Rule (to treat others the way we want them to treat us), and his core teachings (as seen in the Sermon on the Mount), had virtually nothing to do with conventional religious concerns.

Additional examples abound. When a young man asked Jesus how he could inherit eternal life, Jesus didn't say anything about religious beliefs or institutions. Instead, he said, "Keep the commandments, sell your possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow me." In his famous parable about the good Samaritan, loving behavior, not religious beliefs, is what Jesus commended. And in his parable about the last judgment, Jesus tells us that people will be judged not on doctrinal beliefs or institutional fidelity but on how they respond to the poor, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the stranger.

Although it should have dawned on me much earlier, reading these stories about Jesus (without wearing the filter of an institutional church worker) resulted in a life-changing epiphany. I came to the realization that, unlike me (and most clergy I know), *religiosity didn't interest Jesus. Ethical and loving behavior did*. Of course, I had known that in my head for decades. But only recently did I internalize it in my gut.

These days I no longer fret about organized religion or doctrinal beliefs. I still find these subjects interesting. And I enjoy writing about them in Doubter's Parish and other venues. But I'm no longer consumed with them. The religious angst I carried for decades has finally disappeared. It's almost like a light switch has been turned off. I've come to realize that while conventional religion can be helpful and has its place, it's not the main thing. Instead, living a life of love is what matters most.

In short, loving behavior—not religious beliefs or institutions—is the core essence of healthy spirituality. As Mark Karris wisely concludes in his book ***Religious Refugees***, "After religion is no more and all of the hay and stubble of humanity's religious

creations are burned up, all that will remain is love." Jesus would concur.

A few years ago I came across a quote attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes that has come to mean a lot to me. He said, "I would not give a fig for simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity."

After many decades of grappling with faith, I feel like I have finally journeyed through the complexity and found simplicity on the other side. I now realize that I will never understand the mysteries of God or solve the problems of institutional religion. Nor do I need to. Instead, I only need to follow the call of Jesus to live a life of love. It's as simple as that.

The Christian Faith in Two Sentences

Since this is such an important insight for me, I'd like to develop this theme a bit more, even at the risk of being overly repetitive. If I had to summarize everything I've learned (so far) about Christianity into two sentences, this is what I would say: *The Christian faith is not primarily about a book, a creed, an institution, or even a religion. Instead, it's primarily about living a life of love.* I'll briefly unpack those two sentences.

1. ***Christianity is not primarily about a book***. The Bible offers guidance and inspiration to many people, including me. But it's not the heart of Christian faith. For example, the early church thrived for hundreds of years without having what we call the New Testament. And, as we've already seen, in spite of its great value, the Bible contains many troubling passages.

2. ***Christianity is not primarily about a creed.*** The church went centuries without any official doctrinal statements, including the Apostles' Creed. And tragically, that creed doesn't even mention the life, example, or teachings of Jesus. Instead, it jumps from his birth directly to his death. Jesus's entire ministry, including his teachings and acts of love, are literally relegated to a comma in the Apostles' Creed. In many ways, doctrinal beliefs, including the historic creeds, have done more damage than good, reducing Christianity to theological propositions rather than a way of life.

3. ***Christianity is not primarily about an institution.*** Jesus did not intend to create a new religious institution. Especially one that consistently fails to follow his

example and teachings. Yes, the church has also done a lot of good things, as already noted. But the church is not the heartbeat of Jesus's life and mission, which was about advancing the kingdom of God, not maintaining an institution.

4. ***Christianity is not primarily about a religion.*** It's pretty clear Jesus did not come to start a new religion that made him into a God and worshipped him. Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian. He wanted to reform Judaism, not replace it. It would surprise Jesus greatly that his followers created, in his name, the largest religion in the world. He invited people to follow him in living a life of love. He did not call them to create a new religious order.

   Of course, it's important to note that the Bible, doctrinal beliefs, the church, and the Christian religion can all be helpful to people as they seek to follow Jesus. I'm not saying these things are unimportant. But they are not the main thing.

5. ***Instead, Christianity is primarily about living a life of love.*** When Jesus was asked what the ***greatest*** commandment was, he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. . . . [And] love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31 NIV). The second most important person in Christian history, the apostle Paul, once said, "These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the ***greatest*** of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13 NIV). When the two primary figures of Christianity both tell us that the greatest thing is love, we need to pay attention!

The Heart of Christianity

Of course, I'm not the first (or only) person to figure out that Christianity is more about behavior than it is about beliefs or belonging to an institution, as the following examples attest:

- In ***Divinity of Doubt***, Vincent Bugliosi says, "If we must have religion, the seminal test as to the value and merit of any religion worth its salt has to be not what you believe, but what you do—that is, how you treat your fellow man."
- In ***A New Christianity for a New World***, John Shelby Spong says that Christianity is "not something to be *believed* but a faith into which we must *live*."

- ***In Saving God from Religion***, Robin Meyers says that Christianity is "a way of life, not a system of creeds and doctrines demanding intellectual assent to theological propositions."
- In ***Faith after Doubt***, Brian McLaren says, "The only kind of faith that means anything is faith that expresses itself in love."
- In ***If God Is Love Don't Be a Jerk***, John Pavlovitz says, "When it comes to the heart of it all, your religion isn't what you believe, your religion is how you treat people."
- In ***After Jesus before Christianity***, Erin Vearncombe, Brandon Scott, and Hal Taussig convincingly argue that for the first two hundred years, the Jesus movement "was more about correct practice (orthopraxis) than correct belief (orthodoxy)."

Although she didn't write a book, a wise woman once said to me, "I've never believed in the hocus-pocus part of religion. Isn't Christianity about loving your neighbor?" Yes, it is. And that should be our focus.

Seeking to Live a Christian Life

These days, rather than fret about religious beliefs and institutions, I put my spiritual energies into living a Christian life. For example, I try to live out Christian values like love, mercy, grace, honesty, humility, integrity, marital fidelity, inclusiveness, empathy, and authenticity. I also seek to engage in Christian practices like forgiving people, practicing generosity, serving others, expressing gratitude, showing compassion, being kind, observing the sabbath, prioritizing relationships, and working for justice. These kinds of Christian values and practices are central to my spiritual life.

Although I'm now retired, I still engage in Christian ministry. I don't pastor a traditional church anymore. But through my work with Doubter's Parish and other publishing venues (including significant interaction with readers), I serve as a "pastor" to a congregation of seekers, strugglers, and other thinking people who are trying their best to navigate faith in the twenty-first century. I deeply love the work.

And while I no longer hold traditional Christian beliefs, and I'm not (currently)

participating in a traditional Christian church, I enjoy a rich spiritual life. That includes, as already noted, belief in God, love for Jesus, appreciation for the church, meaningful Christian community, and a serious effort to live out Christian values and practices. I still consider myself a follower of Jesus and seek to live a life that would please him. I believe that effort, however imperfectly implemented, is my best way to live an authentic Christian life.

Final Word

The Jewish Talmud says that over a lifetime a person should have a child, plant a tree, and write a book, and I'm glad to have done all three. I have few regrets about my life or vocation. So far, it's mostly been a good ride. At this juncture on the journey, I feel grateful for the past and hopeful about the future. In the meantime, I am a husband, father, grandfather, friend, writer, pastor to doubters, and follower of Jesus. And it is more than enough.

Discussion Guide for Groups

Book clubs, progressive Sunday school classes, and other groups will enjoy reading and discussing My Long Farewell to Traditional Religion and What Remains. Discussion questions for class dialogue follow.

Chapter 1: I Lost Faith in a Literal Bible

In the introduction of chapter 1, Martin cites a text from Numbers 15:35–36 about a man who was stoned to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath. Enlist someone in the group to read that passage. How do you respond to this text? Do you believe God would actually command the death penalty for picking up sticks? Martin also cites 2 Kings 2:23–25. Read the passage. What is your response?

Martin tells the story about his college professor saying, "Although we must always take the Bible seriously, we do not always need to take it literally." Martin said that comment saved his faith. Do you agree with this professor? Why or why not?

The chapter lists numerous problematic passages in the Bible (in bullet points). Review some of these. How do you feel about these being in Scripture?

Martin mentions the story of Noah and the ark in this chapter. Review his three reasons for not taking this story literally. What do you think of those arguments?

Ask someone to read the brief section on the Bible and homosexuality. Lead the class to share their responses as time permits.

Near the end of the chapter, Martin says, "I came to realize that Scripture is not a magical 'inerrant' book dropped from heaven. Instead, the Bible (and its extremely complicated compilation, recording, editing, and canonization) is a fully human document with all the scientific, cultural, and theological limitations of its ancient time frame." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

Chapter 2: I Lost Faith in the Evangelical Church

Do you resonate with Martin's overall story about leaving the evangelical church? Why or why not?

In the section "No Second Thoughts," Martin lists many problems within today's evangelical church including:

- It makes women second-class citizens.
- It insists on biblical inerrancy.
- It is highly partisan.
- It attacks the LGBTQ community.
- It supports Donald Trump, the most anti-Jesus president in history.
- It demonizes immigrants.
- It fosters prejudice against Muslims.
- It fosters white Christian nationalism.
- It supports authoritarian leaders.
- It disregards the example and teachings of Jesus.
- It fosters an overall spirit of anger, fear, negativity, and self-righteous judgmentalism.

Discuss as many of these subjects as time permits. Do you agree with these critiques? Why or why not?

Near the end of the chapter, Martin writes, "In short, evangelicalism has become a highly negative force, doing great damage to the Christian faith, the American church, and the common good of humanity. In the words of Obery Hendricks Jr., evangelical faith in America has devolved into 'Christians against Christianity.'" Ask class members to respond to that quote.

Chapter 3: I Lost Faith in Traditional Doctrines

In this chapter Martin says he does not believe in hell. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Martin also rejects the belief that people can only be saved by believing in the historical Jesus. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Martin devotes several pages to the doctrine of sacrificial blood atonement. He rejects this doctrine. What is your response to this?

At the end of chapter 3, Martin makes a list of twenty-one beliefs from the Apostles' Creed. How many of these do you believe? Would it bother you if your pastor didn't believe everything in this creed? Why or why not?

Chapter 4: I Lost Faith in the Providence of God

In his opening story, Martin talks about watching CNN and an online worship service at the same time. In the story he speaks about the "cognitive dissonance" between a praise song about God's protecting us from harm and the horrific suffering of pandemic. Do you have similar moments of "cognitive dissonance" when you see suffering in the world?

In the section "Notes from a Pastoral Journal," Martin lists numerous examples of suffering that called into question the doctrine of providence for him. Discuss a few of these examples and share your thoughts with the group.

In this chapter, Martin shares several examples of the arts and providential theology. He mentions a novel, song, television show, and movie that made him question God's providence. Have you had similar experiences? What were they?

Discuss the closing section on "The Death of Providence." How did that story make you feel? Did you resonate with it? Did you disagree with it? Did this chapter on losing faith in God's providence disturb you?

Chapter 5: I Lost Faith in Institutional Religion

In the opening story, Martin cites a novel about a fictional Pope losing faith in the church. Have you ever felt this way? When? Why? How did you deal with that?

Martin speaks about racism in the church. Have you ever experienced that? How big a problem is this today?

Martin tells a story about a man who has "retired from religion." He was disgruntled with every branch of the church: Catholic, evangelical, and mainline. Have you ever felt like retiring from religion? Why?

Martin lists numerous examples of the church behaving badly through history. How did that make you feel?

In this chapter, Martin tells about his "brutal pastorate." Have you ever experienced a brutal congregation? What were the dynamics? Did you stay at the church or leave it? Why?

At the end of the chapter, Martin mentions a quote that says, "Tis a great tragedy to linger in a land through which one has already passed." He then relates that to the church. Do you resonate with that quote? Have you "already passed through" the land of institutional religion? If so, do you still "linger" there? Why?

Chapter 6: I Lost Faith in a Traditional God

Martin begins this chapter with a story about God no longer being a working number. Does that metaphor resonate with you? Why or why not?

Have members of the class read the quotes about the death of theism in the section "No Longer Believable." What do you think about these quotes? Do you agree with these authors that traditional theism is no longer adequate in the twenty-first century?

Review some of the journal quotes Martin shares about losing faith in a theistic God. Can you relate to these feelings? Why or why not?

The chapter includes the metaphor of Michelangelo's painting of God falling from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Does that metaphor make sense to you? Is it descriptive of the modern religious experience? Why do you feel that way?

Martin concludes the chapter by talking about "weeping at the divine grave." How did that poet's quote make you feel? Have you ever had a similar experience? If you are willing, please share it with the group.

Chapter 7: I Lost Faith in My Ministerial Vocation

Since this chapter deals with issues specific to clergypersons, your group will probably not want to discuss it (unless your group is a clergy group). However, if you would like to briefly discuss the chapter before diving into the next one, you could ask the group if it would bother them to have a pastor who no longer believed in traditional doctrines and/or was deeply disappointed in institutional religion. Why do you feel this way?

Chapter 8: I Still Believe in God

Near the beginning of the chapter, Martin shares the following quote from Barbara Brown Taylor: "I cannot say for sure when my reliable ideas about God began to slip away, but the big chest I used to keep them in is smaller than a shoebox now." What is your response to that quote?

Review the section "In Good Company." Do the quotes from Spong, Borg, Frantz, Bass, and Taylor makes sense to you? How would you define nontheistic theology?

Look at the section "Backstroking into the Unknowable." Are you OK living with so much ambiguity about God?

How do you feel about the following journal entry from Martin?

> *I seem to be shifting toward a new spiritual worldview. A traditional God "out there," separate from the world, who "came down" to save us through the sacrifice of Jesus feels small and impoverished to me. Instead, I'm increasingly drawn to a life-force Spirit who connects the entire universe (animals, plants, humans, stars, planets, galaxies, and even inanimate objects) together in a mysterious web of interrelated life. This Spirit engulfs the universe (while still being more than the universe), offering a sort of nontraditional transcendence, full of mystery and awe. This is nothing like the God of classic theism. Instead, it feels far richer to me. This could become a life-giving spirituality for my soul but not for my profession. If I fully walk through this door, I'll have to close many others.*

In advance, enlist someone to review the strengths of nontheistic theology. What do you think about these?

In advance, enlist someone to review the weaknesses of nontheistic theology. What do you think about these?

Do you think a nontheistic view of God can sustain an individual Christian? What about a congregation?

Do you think a person who is nontheistic and doesn't believe in a supernatural God or a divine Christ is still a Christian? Why or why not?

Chapter 9: I Still Love Jesus

In the opening section, "Jesus in the Windows," Martin says, "They (the stained-glass windows) reminded me that the Jesus story, regardless of its literal historical accuracy, is the defining story of my life, providing me with meaning, purpose, and hope." Do you resonate with that quote? Why or why not? Are you comfortable with the phrase, "regardless of its literal historical accuracy?" Or does that quote bother you? If so, why?

In this chapter Martin speaks about going to the Passion play in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. How do you feel when you watch a movie, play, or TV show depicting the life of Jesus? Does it feel real to you or unreal?

Do you believe in the virgin birth? Why or why not? Does it trouble you that many Christians do not believe in this doctrine?

In this chapter, Martin describes how he has moved from belief in the divine Christ to belief in the human Jesus. What do you think of this distinction? Is that still Christianity?

Ask someone to read “The Last Scene.” What feelings does this story evoke in you?

Chapter 10: I Still Appreciate the Church

Do you resonate with the opening story about the church being both “my pain” and “my joy.” Why or why not?

What good things can you affirm about institutional religion? Does the good outweigh the bad? Why do you feel that way?

What do you think about “stage 4” faith communities? Have you ever experienced a church like that? Would you like to be a part of that kind of church? Why or why not?

What was your response to Martin’s story about the flawed, human, but glorious Christmas Eve service? Do you experience the church as both flawed and human but also glorious? If so, do you tend to emphasize the flaws or the beauty?

Martin concludes this chapter by saying the church has given him both a blessing and a limp. Can you relate to that story? If so, please share your experience.

Chapter 11: I Still Experience Christian Community

Do you find Chrisitan community in a church? Please share examples.

Do you experience Christian community in your family? Please share examples.

Do you experience Christian community in individual friendships. Please share examples.

Do you experience Christian community in friendship groups? Please share examples.

In this chapter Martin refers to the longest-ever study on human happiness. The director summarized what they learned in this seventy-year study by saying, “We learned that the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people.” Do you agree with that conclusion?

The chapter developed the fact that Jesus invested time in developing both individual friendships and a group of friends. What are your thoughts about that?

Where do you find Christian community?

Chapter 12: I Still Attempt to Live a Christian Life

Martin introduces this chapter with a story from the television show The Americans. In this episode a pastor said, “None of those things (belief in God, religion, or prayer) matter. All that matters is how we treat each other.” What do you think about that comment? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Do you agree with Martin’s argument that Jesus did not care much about religious doctrines or institutions? Why or why not?

In this chapter Martin quotes Mark Karris, “After religion is no more and all of the hay and stubble of humanity’s religious creations are burned up, all that will remain is love.”

Do you agree with this quote?

In this chapter Martin says:

> *A few years ago I came across a quote attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes that has come to mean a lot to me. He said, "I would not give a fig for simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity."*
>
> *After many decades of grappling with faith, I feel like I have finally journeyed through the complexity and found simplicity on the other side. I now realize that I will never understand the mysteries of God or solve the problems of institutional religion. Nor do I need to. Instead, I only need to follow the call of Jesus to live a life of love. It's as simple as that."*

Do you resonate with this quote? Why or why not?

Martin summarizes Christianity in the following two sentences: "The Christian faith is not primarily about a book, a creed, an institution, or even a religion. Instead, it's primarily about living a life of love." Quickly review the paragraphs that unpack that summary statement. Do you agree with Martin's two-sentence summary? Why or why not?

Near the end of the chapter, Martin speaks about living out Christian values and practices. Is that enough? Or do we need to affirm doctrinal beliefs?

Appendix

Differences between Traditional and Nontraditional Faith

The following two lists summarize some of the major differences between traditional and nontraditional faith.

Traditional Faith	Nontraditional Faiths
Divine Bible	Human Bible
Personal God	Nonpersonal God
Providential God	Nonprovidential God
Supernatural God	Super Natural God
Institutional Focus	Noninstitutional Focus
Focus on the Divine Christ	Focus on the Human Jesus
Focus on Beliefs	Focus on Behavior
Certainty	Ambiguity
Static	Evolving
Closed Canon (the Bible)	Open Canon (All Spiritual Books)
One Way to God	Many Ways to God
Religious Focus	Spiritual Focus
Doubts Discouraged	Doubts Welcome

About the Author

Before his recent retirement, Martin Thielen served as a minister in the United Methodist Church. During the early years of his career, he worked in the Southern Baptist Convention. He served churches in Arkansas, Hawaii, and Tennessee. He pastored small, medium, and large churches, including a megachurch. He also worked as a national denominational editor, consultant, workshop leader, and adjunct seminary professor. Before becoming a clergyperson, Martin worked for New England Life Insurance Company.

Martin is the author of hundreds of articles and newspaper columns. He has published nine books, including the bestseller, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* In 2021, Martin launched *Doubter's Parish website*, which seeks to help thinking people navigate faith in the twenty-first century. He is also a frequent contributor to ***United Methodist Insight***, ***Progressive Christianity***, ***Baptist News Global***, the ***Herald-Citizen***, and ***The Tennessean***.

Martin holds a bachelor of arts degree from Ouachita University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas; a master of divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; and a doctor of ministry degree from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri. He also did a year of PhD studies at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Martin and his wife Paula reside in Cookeville, Tennessee. They have two grown children and two young grandchildren. His hobbies including writing, walking, cycling, reading, surfing (when he can find a wave!), playing the guitar, and journaling. He also loves watching great movies, including his all-time favorite, ***The Shawshank Redemption***.

For additional information about Martin's life and work, see the introduction.