

Confronting Christianity – Part 1

Aren't we better off without religion?

Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – Aug. 28th, 2022

Intro:

- Over the course of the next twelve weeks, we will embark on a journey that will strengthen your faith in Christ and equip and empower you to lovingly, logically, and biblically engage with questions and criticism that people of this generation have with Christianity. The book *Confronting Christianity – 12 hard questions for the world's largest religion* by Rebecca McLaughlin will serve as a guide for this series, and I would encourage you to pick up a copy.
- Over the past two decades there has been a barrage of books that has influenced the thinking of a generation of young people and western culture as a whole. “In 2004, Sam Harris published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, followed in 2006 by *Letter to a Christian Nation*. That same year, Richard Dawkins released *The God Delusion*, which remained on the New York Times best seller list for fifty-one weeks. In 2008, the late Christopher Hitchens launched his tour de force of new atheist persuasion, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. These rhetorically gifted men preached that Christianity was neither plausible nor desirable” (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* p. 18).
- It seems to me that the song "Imagine" by John Lennon has become the theme song of the world as it has been played at 5 opening ceremonies for the Olympics over the past 25 years. You probably know the song and some of you could sing it word for word. Have you ever really paid attention to the lyrics? Here are some of them:

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky
Imagine all the people
Livin' for today
Ah

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Livin' life in peace

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

- The thoughts, philosophy, and arguments from these books, songs, TED talks, videos, podcasts, and others like them have taken seed in the minds of this generation. "In 2016, the largest survey of incoming freshmen to US universities found that 30.9 percent claimed no religious affiliation—a dramatic 10 percent rise since 2006. This group broke down into freshmen who selected ‘none’ (16 percent), those who identified as agnostic (8.5 percent), and those who claimed atheism (6.4 percent)" (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* p. 20).
- Another 9% claiming “other religions” make the total 40% of incoming freshman who identified as non-Christian. Sixty percent said they were "Christian," but even that number makes me wonder how many of them are active and growing in their faith, or versus those who just marked "Christian" because of the culture.
- Any way we look at it, there is work to be done. There is a war being fought to capture the hearts and minds of people away from the true God who gives life to all things, and we must arm and equip ourselves to fight this war because of the grace, love, and truth that is found in Jesus Christ.
- In the face of all of this, we are going to tackle the questions one by one, with the first one being "isn't the world better off without religion?" because doesn't religion cause more problems than it solves?

The benefits of regular religious participation

- "In 2016, Harvard School of Public Health professor Tyler VanderWeele and journalist John Siniff wrote a USA Today op-ed entitled "Religion May Be a Miracle Drug." . . .The authors go on to outline the mental and physical health benefits that are correlated with regular religious participation—for most Americans, going to church— (can reduce) mortality rates by 20–30 percent over a fifteen-year period. Research suggests that *those who regularly attend services are*:
 - more optimistic
 - have lower rates of depression
 - are less likely to commit suicide
 - have a greater purpose in life
 - are less likely to divorce
 - and are more self-controlled
- In general, religious participation appears to be good for your health and happiness. Turn this data on its head and the trend toward secularization in America is a public-health crisis." (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* p. 21).

Heb 10:25 NIV

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The benefits of good connective relationships

- "Religion fosters relationships, and relationships matter. The director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, a seventy-five-year study of well-being, summarizes its findings like this: ‘*Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.*’ Throughout the study, the subjects expected their happiness would depend on fame, wealth, and high achievement. But, in reality, the happiest and healthiest people prioritized relationships with family, friends, and community. Perhaps we do not need a

seventy-five-year study to convince us that loneliness is lethal. Our single-portion society teaches us to prioritize choice over commitment." (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* p. 22).

Ps 133:1 NIV

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

- Money buys you more space and more stuff. Freedom buys you more choices and options. But what really matters is true friendships based in real love based on the eternal love from the God of love.

The benefits of living Biblical principles

- *It really is more blessed to give than receive - "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).* "A growing body of research suggests that giving is good for us.
 - Volunteering has a positive impact on our mental and physical health.
 - Actively caring for others often yields greater physical and psychological benefits than being cared for.
 - Helping others in the workplace seems to improve career satisfaction.
 - And financial generosity has psychological payoffs.
- Atheist social psychologist Jonathan Haidt observes: Surveys have long shown that religious believers in the United States are happier, healthier, longer-lived, and more generous to charity and to each other than are secular people. . . . Religious believers give more money than secular folk to secular charities, and to their neighbors. They give more of their time, too, and of their blood". (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 22-23).
- The generosity of the lives of Christians pays dividends—both for society and for individuals.
- *Love of money disappoints* - Jesus taught that it was **harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:23–24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:24–25)**. The apostle Paul called the love of money "**a root of all kinds of evil**" (1 Tim. 6:10).
- "In the 2016 survey *The American Freshman*, 82.3 percent of freshmen checked 'becoming very well off financially' as an 'essential' or 'very important' life objective. This represents an increase of nearly 10 percent in the last decade and has overtaken 'raising a family' as a top priority."
- It is true that "a little money can make a big difference to the truly poor," but the evidence finds "that beyond a basic level of security, increased wealth is only slightly correlated with an increased sense of well-being. As economist Jeffrey Sachs notes in the *World Happiness Report 2018*, in the US, "income per capita has more than doubled since 1972 while happiness (or subjective well-being, SWB) has remained roughly unchanged or has even declined. Invest your life in money over relationships, and the returns will not satisfy. (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 22-23).
- *Work works when it is a calling.*

Col 3:23-24 NIV

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

- "Christians are called to see work as part of their worship—whether they are designing a building or sweeping its floors. Again, this proves to be good advice. Psychological research suggests that we need meaningful work to thrive. If we work just for money, we tend to find it unsatisfying; but if we put our hearts into our work and see it as a calling that resonates with our values, connects us to people, and fits within a larger vision, we experience joy.
- One study observed the attitudes of janitors emptying bedpans and cleaning up vomit in a hospital. Those who saw themselves as part of a team caring for the sick, and who went above and beyond to do their job with excellence, saw their work as a calling and enjoyed it far more than those who worked just for a paycheck. So, whether we are performing brain surgery or cleaning up vomit, we can put our hearts into our work, connect it with a larger purpose, and gain satisfaction." (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 24-25).
- *We really can be happy in all circumstances* - After going through years of difficult and trying circumstances, one after another, the apostle Paul wrote this from prison:

Phil. 4:12–13 NIV

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

- The ability to be content regardless of circumstances through the Christ who gives us strength is the critical key to abundant living. Modern psychologists have seen this truth in example after example of people who have lived this reality. For example, Harvard psychology professor Daniel Gilbert points to Thomas Browne: "I am the happiest man alive. I have that in me that can convert poverty to riches, adversity to prosperity." Browne was drawing on his Christian faith to immunize himself against suffering. He also points to Moreese Bickham, an African American man who was wrongly convicted of murdering two white police officers and spent thirty-seven years in prison. On his release, Bickham declared: "I don't have one minute's regret. Bickham reflected, "until I was laying at the point of death with a bullet shot [through the] top of my heart. There is a remarkable correspondence between the psychological immune system and the biblical call to contentment. (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 25-27).
- *Gratitude is good for us* – "Paul commands Christians to **"rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances"** (1 Thess. 5:16 NIV). This seems unrealistic, even insensitive. But Paul was not writing from an armchair, but from profound experiences of suffering: beatings, shipwreck, rejection, sickness, and the prospect of execution. And psychologists today have discovered that conscious, daily gratitude is quite literally good for you.
- In experimental comparisons, those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis:
 - exercised more
 - reported fewer physical symptoms
 - felt better about their lives
 - and were more optimistic about the upcoming week

- Gratitude is buried at the heart of Christianity. Christians believe not only that God created us and every good thing we have, but also that He offers us salvation as a free gift, won for us by Jesus's death in our place. For the Christian, therefore, thankfulness is not just a positivity technique: it is a deep disposition toward a life-giving and life-saving God." (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* p. 27).
- *Self-control and perseverance help us thrive* – "Christians are called to live lives characterized by long-term endurance and costly self-control. For example, the apostle Peter urged his readers, **"Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love"** (2 Pet. 1:5–7 NIV).
- Jesus called the Christian life a "hard" road (Matt. 7:14), and multiple biblical texts describe a race that we must run with endurance and passion. For example, the writer to the Hebrews urges, **"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross"** (Heb. 12:1–2).
- Unglamorous as they are, perseverance and self-control appear to be key predictors of flourishing across a range of indexes. Indeed, psychologist Angela Duckworth suggests that the quality of grit, which she defines as "passion and perseverance for very long-term goals," can be more predictive of a person's success than social intelligence, good looks, health, or IQ." (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 27-28).
- *Forgiveness is foundational* - When one of Jesus's disciples suggested an upper limit for forgiveness—"as many as seven times?"—Jesus replied, **"Not . . . seven times, but seventy-seven times"** (Matt. 18:21–22). He taught his followers to pray, **Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. (Luke 11:4)** Jesus grounded human forgiveness in the radical forgiveness of God, arguing that forgiven people must forgive.
- Again, this turns out to be for our good. Forgiveness—particularly forgiveness not dependent on the actions of the offender—has been linked to multiple positive mental and physical health outcomes. In the New Testament, the forgiveness ethic is coupled with the command not to take revenge. But this is not ultimately an abandonment of justice. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that final justice lies in the hands of God. Christians are commanded to protect the weak and vulnerable, but not to seek their own revenge or vindication. Instead, Christians must forgive as they have been forgiven." (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 28-29).

Conclusion

- Now all this information does not address specific theological claims of Christianity (we will get to this in future messages), but it does set a solid foundation for the benefits of regular religious participation, good connective relationships, and living out biblical principles. It provides well-researched documentation that religion—specifically Christianity—is beneficial for individuals and societies as a whole.
- Topic for next week: *Doesn't Christianity Crush Diversity?*

*This sermon series is guided by the book *Confronting Christianity – 12 hard questions for the world's largest religion* by Rebecca McLaughlin.