

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I can't figure you out. Some months what you write is inspiring and defends Christianity and is quite orthodox. But other months, you sound like a faithless skeptic undermining people's faith in the Bible. Are you a conservative or a liberal?

I don't fit comfortably in either the conservative or the liberal camp. I prefer to think of myself as an orthodox Christian (as opposed to a heretic) or just as a plain Christian. I identify with and see myself in continuity with all the Christians of the past, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. I believe the basics of the Christian faith that most Christians have always believed, so that I can say the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed and assent to all their assertions.

But I know that some of the things I have written about the Bible have made some readers uneasy. This is because I do not hold to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and worry about people "painting themselves into a corner" with their belief in biblical inerrancy. What do I mean?

When I was in college, I knew a fellow named Wayne who, when he learned that his roommate had been diagnosed with leukemia, prayed for him to be healed with complete confidence that he would be.

Wayne had been influenced by certain teachers to believe that a) if we pray for anything that is in God's will

with complete, perfect faith, it will surely be done, b) God wills us to be healthy, then c) when we pray for healing, it will certainly happen. This "faith teaching" says that if healing doesn't happen, it must either be because we did not have perfect faith or someone around us didn't have perfect faith, or else there was some secret, unconfessed sin in our life or in the life of someone around us.

Anyway, Wayne had perfect faith that his roommate would be miraculously healed. When the roommate died, Wayne utterly lost his faith. He concluded that he had been hoodwinked by those who had evangelized him and that Christianity was a lie and a hoax.

I knew another young man (a pre-med student named Scott) who did "street ministry" every Friday and Saturday night, "witnessing" to people along "The Drag" at the campus of the University of Texas, Austin. Doing this seriously cut into the time he had to study, but he was confident, based on the verse, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things will be added unto you" (and surely winning souls

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for Christ was God's will), that God could be trusted to see that he got the grades necessary for him to get into medical school. When Scott's grades came in and they were too low to get into medical school, he too concluded that he had been tricked and lied to and that Christianity was a hoax. By that time, he had married a young Christian woman I knew, and he mocked her mercilessly for wanting to go to church and made her life miserable until they finally divorced.

What these two true stories have in common to my mind is that a sincere person "painted himself into a corner" so that when things didn't happen as he had faith they would, he saw no alternative other than to conclude that there was no God or, if God existed, He was cruel and deceived people.

Both young men in effect put God to the test by thinking that God would certainly do a particular thing. When God didn't, they had logically "painted themselves into a corner" and had to conclude that God wasn't there. Their faith was so strong that they had no doubt at all – and it quickly collapsed because of their well-mean-

ing but unrealistic expectations.

What happened to Wayne and Scott is always in the back of my mind when I think about the subject of biblical inerrancy, believing in the Bible and that it is a perfect, divine book. My fear is that those who believe in biblical inerrancy and that the truth of Christianity stands or falls on the perfection of the Bible will some day, if they ever are shown one error or imperfection in the Bible, utterly lose their faith, and like Wayne and Scott, conclude that Christianity is a hoax, that there is no God or, if God exists, He is cruel and deceives people.

As a pastor concerned for the welfare of souls, I believe it is a better course not to attribute perfection to the Bible (or to the Pope and anyone else) but only to God. If people have a view of the Bible that allows for there to be human elements in it as well as divine in it, they are not as likely, it seems to me, to lose their faith over the Bible. I don't want people to set themselves up for disappointment or paint themselves into a corner by putting their complete trust anywhere else but in God.

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