

Losing Our Religion
Because It's Anti-Intellectual
July 16, 2017

Preservice Video

Worship Songs – From the Day / Fierce

Video – Behind the Scenes

Feature – “All in Your Head” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

I have to say that song is one of my favorite country songs ever. As much as I like the sound of it what I like even more is the cleverness of the lyrics. No other form of music can tell a story like country music can tell a story.

What I *don't* like about that song, however – and the reason we picked it to set up today's message – is that it painfully reinforces one of the predominant criticisms of religion in our culture these days: *that religion (and Christianity in particular) is anti-intellectual*

and anti-science; that those who believe ...

- Are basing that belief purely on a feeling “deep down in their soul” (to quote the song)
- And then acting out in ways that are irrational: being “moved by the spirit to take up a snake” or some other crazy thing.
- And then denying obvious truth: “we never walked on the moon” and “Elvis ain’t dead.” (He is)

Of course, the reason we care about this – and I’m speaking of those who are Christians (believers in and followers of Jesus of Nazareth); the reason we care about this is that more and more Americans (and, in particular, our young people) are turning away from “religion” these days and *this is one of the criticisms*.

“As science and logical thinking discovers more about our world,” critics say, “it’s becoming clear that religion is at best a sentimental relic from a bygone era; at worst it’s a deception – a tool of superstition and fear and mysticism employed by the church to keep people in line. But now, we can leave all of that behind and move forward to a future free of religion.”

And because more and more people are thinking that way ... those of us who follow Jesus and represent Jesus are now confronted with two very big questions:

- Do you have to reject science to be a Christian?
- Is our faith anti-intellectual – against rational thought and logical thinking?

Now, I’m sure it will come as no surprise that I think the answer to both of those questions is

“no” and I’ll explain why in a bit.

But, as I’ve said each week, if you’re a skeptic I’m fairly certain that what I have to say won’t convince you. That’s OK, though, because that’s really not my goal. My goal – my hope, actually – is that you might consider the possibility that you may have been misinformed and even misled about the nature of Christian faith.

In addition, I have a great concern in this area for those who are younger believers and followers of Jesus. Of all of the criticisms we face in this culture, none has more power to belittle us and make us feel ignorant and stupid for believing like this one does.

So, if you’re a Christian, my hope is that you will be encouraged that you are not.

Dumbing Down “Faith”

With that said, however, I do think it's necessary to address one big reason why "faith" and "people of faith" have the reputation of being anti-intellectual and anti-science. And that is ... *we've earned it.* We've earned it.

Maybe not personally and individually but, over the years, many well-meaning followers of Jesus have not understood the true nature of their faith and have unwittingly helped to propagate this reputation.

And, I have to tell you ... as someone formally trained and educated in the sciences (I have a Bachelor of Science degree in Math and a Master of Science degree in Computer Science to go along with my theological degree and training), I have to say ... *this bugs me. Greatly.*

And if you've been around NHCC for any time at all, I'm sure you've picked up on that. I think it's dumb for Christians to be dumb!

- To be dumb about the Bible
- To be dumb about the world
- To be dumb about our faith: what we believe and why we believe it.

In his later years the Apostle Peter (one of Jesus' very first followers) wrote:

We were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendor with our own eyes.

2 Peter 1:16 (NLT)

In other words, “our faith is not based on a myth or a fairytale like the stories of the Greek gods and goddesses.”

“So,” he wrote ...

If someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. (But do this

in a gentle and respectful way).
1 Peter 3:15-16 (NLT)

Unfortunately, we haven't been very good at that, collectively speaking.

Instead, we too often misrepresent the nature of our faith in at least three weak, faulty and, quite frankly, dumb ways.

1. Asserting that the “best faith” is “blind faith.”

It doesn't require evidence; we “just believe.” God said it. I believe it. That settles it. No questions asked.

The problem with that, obviously, is that rational people in every other walk of life accept *almost nothing* on blind faith.

Thankfully, as Peter told everyone who would read his letters, that's *not* what Christianity is.

It's a belief and a lifestyle based on real historical events – the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the establishment of a 2,000 year movement we call “the church” that began because of *the evidence* of those events – and not “blind faith.”

Another way we misrepresent the nature of our faith is by ...

2. Over-spiritualizing the unknown (sometimes this is called the “God of the Gaps” argument – where every unexplainable occurrence is attributed to God’s hand at work).

The problem with attributing every unexplained occurrence to God (when we put God in the gaps of our knowledge), then once someone explains that gap, there is no more need for God.

And then skeptics will say, “See your God didn’t really exist in the first place!”

For instance, Isaac Newton (who was both a scientist and a Christian) discovered that gravity was the basic reason planets orbited the sun. But he couldn't figure everything out, and in his writings he attributed to the unknowns to God's hand – *literally shoving the planets around*.

But 60 years later, a French physicist figured out what Newton could not and boldly pronounced that he had no need for Newton's "God hypothesis."ⁱ

This next one will probably get me in trouble for saying it but it needs to be said. One of the ways in which I think we've been dumb about our faith is by ...

3. Embracing an overly-literal understanding of the Bible (by which I mean, "weighting every word with equal value").

Now, just to be clear, this has always been done

with the best of intentions: to uphold the supreme importance of the Old and New Testaments.

“After all,” the thinking goes, “the Apostle Paul wrote that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed.’ And since God is not the author of error, it must all be literally true just as it is written.”

The problem is that this doesn’t take into account that people living 4,000 years ago simply did not have the words and concepts to describe what the Spirit was saying to them *then* in ways that make sense *today*.

For instance (and there are many examples of this), in more than a few places, the authors of scripture describe God as the one who “rides upon the clouds.”

Are they claiming that to be literally or scientifically true? No, they’re not.

Instead, they are using poetic language – *appropriate language* for that place and time – to communicate God’s oversight and care for His creation.

And that’s OK. That’s good. That’s *useful* even to us moderns today who know that God isn’t “up there” in the clouds somewhere.

As Paul wrote ... and this is his full and complete statement on the matter:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is <what?> useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that <who?> the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

Look at what Paul is *not* saying. He’s not saying “the Scripture is intended to describe the reality of the universe in the same manner as a science book.”

What he's saying is "God gave this to us – all of it – to guide *believers* in our faith and in our daily practice of it."

So, I think being overly-literal – assigning the same weight to each word – has not been helpful.

The Pursuit of Truth

Now, there are other ways we misrepresent the nature of our faith but I think you get the idea.

And I don't mean to be hypercritical of people who do that because I've been one of them. And I realize that most Christ-followers don't have the time or ability to become scholars about the faith.

But we can do better. We *need* to do better.

“The greatest commandment of all,” Jesus once said (and we talked about this last week), “is to ...

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your <what?> mind.” Matthew 22:37
(NIV)

Not only does faith have an emotional and spiritual dimension it also has a *rational* dimension. What we believe and why *ought* to have – and *does* have – a logical and reasoned basis.

So, let’s talk about that for a bit. And let’s go back to those two questions we raised earlier:

- Do you have to reject science to be a Christian?
- Is Christian faith anti-intellectual – against rational thought and logical thinking?

As I said before, I believe the answer to these questions is an unmitigated “no.”

And I believe that for the simple reason that our founder and leader, Jesus, taught us that *truth* is what sets people *free*. And so we believe that truth, wherever it comes from – whether it’s from the Bible or a science book or a history book; truth is a good thing.

In fact, Christian theologians for centuries beginning with Augustine have gone so far to assert that “all truth is God’s truth.”ⁱⁱ The Apostle Paul affirmed this same idea when he wrote that in Christ are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”ⁱⁱⁱ

... which is why a more recent Christian theologian writes that ...

“Coming to know Christ provides the most basic possible motive for pursuing the tasks of human learning. The Jesus Christ who

saves sinners is the same Christ who beckons his followers to serious use of their minds for serious explorations of the world.”^{iv}

Of course, a skeptic at this point could argue “well, Rick, it sure does seem like a lot of Bible-believing Christians (and their pastors and their theologians) *do* reject science. For example, just look at the ‘creation versus evolution’ battles that are still going on in a lot of places.”

“Plus, as you yourself said, a lot of Christians (and pastors and theologians) *do* take an anti-intellectual approach to their faith. They’re suspicious of anything and anyone that doesn’t point back to their Book. Just look at all the conservative Christian parents that are homeschooling their kids these days.”

Fair enough on both counts. The “Christian

position” on science and rational thinking isn’t obvious.

- Partly because of the way we (those of us who follow Jesus) have misrepresented our faith.
- Partly because there’s a bit of a strawman argument from those who are antagonistic to Christians and Christianity.
- And partly – maybe even *mostly* – because it’s not something we talk about all that often in church. It’s not something that followers of Jesus are taught on a regular basis.

A Christian Framework

So, let’s take a few minutes this morning to do that.

And I'll apologize in advance that it's impossible to do this justice in the short amount of time we have but I'm going to give you four statements that I think will at least point in the direction of a Christian framework concerning science and rational thinking and, hopefully, clear up some of the confusion.

And to try and keep it interesting, I'll intersperse a couple of videos as we go along.

So, let's get started. This first piece of a Christian framework is pretty basic.

1. Humans (who are created in God's image) are rational because God is rational.

In the prologue to the biography that John the Apostle wrote about his friend, Jesus, it says:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. He was
with God in the beginning.*

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. John 1:1-3 (NIV)

Now, what's interesting about that is that the word translated "Word" is, in the original Greek, the word "Logos" from which we get our English word "logic." It encompasses the idea of an intelligence that has the ability to think, plan, rationalize and create.

This is what the first followers of Jesus believed about God and, as John implies in this passage, also about Jesus who was God-in-the-flesh. And, they believed that this is why humans, as those created in the mold (so to speak) of God, also have this ability to think, plan, rationalize and create.

(You never see animals doing this, BTW. Humans really are qualitatively different).

And because humans are rational, we have the ability, the Bible says, to look at nature and from its orderliness know that there is a Creator – a God.

In fact, we're *encouraged* in the scriptures to do just that: to give attention to the created order, for nature rightly perceived *will* reveal God – though not at the same level as direct revelation, i.e. the words of Jesus and the apostles and the prophets as recorded in the Bible.

So, this is the first thing to understand. Christianity teaches that we're rational because God is rational and, therefore, we can use our minds to understand and know ultimate reality (which is certainly not anti-intellectual or anti-science).

It fact, it is *precisely because* of this rationality that the second piece of the framework exists. And that is ...

2. Modern science originated with Christianity.

Most people aren't aware of this and, in fact, it has been argued and (as we'll see) debunked that Christianity was and still is hostile to science.

But that's just not true. For example:

- The inventor of the big bang theory was a Belgian priest by the name of Georges Lemaître. This guy actually solved Einstein's equations (which Einstein himself could never do) and predicted the expansion of the universe, which was later verified by the Hubble Telescope.
- The principles of genetics were discovered by a Moravian monk by the name of Gregor Mendel,.
- Some of the oldest and most scientific

universities in the world (including Oxford, Cambridge and St Andrews, for instance) were founded as Christian institutions.

And there are many other examples.^v

Of course, an informed skeptic might ask, “But Rick, what about the Dark Ages where Christianity suppressed science? What about Galileo and how the church treated him for saying that the earth circled the sun and not vice versa?”

Quite frankly, this a myth known as “the conflict thesis.”

- The myth goes that the Greeks and Romans were wise and rational types who loved science and were on the brink of doing all kinds of marvelous things (inventing full-scale steam engines is one example that is usually, rather fancifully,

invoked) until Christianity came along.

- Christianity then banned all learning and rational thought and ushered in the Dark Ages.
- Then an iron-fisted theocracy backed by a Gestapo-style Inquisition prevented any science or questioning inquiry from happening until Leonardo da Vinci re-invented intelligence and the wondrous Renaissance saved us all from medieval darkness.

In the words of *atheist* historian, Tim O'Neill ...

In the academic sphere, at least, the “Conflict Thesis” of a historical war between science and theology has been long since overturned.

So, it is very odd that so many of my fellow atheists cling so desperately to a long-dead

position that was only ever upheld by amateur Nineteenth Century polemicists and not the careful research of recent, objective, peer-reviewed historians.

This is strange behavior for people who like to label themselves “rationalists.”^{vi}

- k A good book on this subject, if you're interested in knowing more, is James Hannam's, *God's Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science*.**

Now, as for Galileo, that story is a little more complex than most of us have heard. It's not merely an issue of science vs. religion. Two things going on ...

- The scientific consensus of his day was strongly against his theory and he had absolutely no proof of his claims. And the one argument he had (based on tides) turned out to be completely wrong.

- The concern of the Catholic Church was not so much his theory but that Galileo was attempting to interpret scripture for himself, which was a huge issue right after the Protestant Reformation.^{vii} It was about scripture not science.

So, humans are rational because God is rational. And that rationality gave rise to modern science and scientists.

Here's the third piece that forms a Christian framework on the issue.

3. Science for all of its wonders, has gaps and limits, too.

It's very good at what it does, which is telling us about how the physical world works. But it also has its limits: there are certain things it *can't* tell us about ... which is nicely illustrated in this

video.

Let's watch.

Video: 1 – If Science Answers Everything, Who Needs God? (3 mins)

By the way, that video comes from Ravi Zacharis International Ministries, if you'd like to do more research.

And now, here's the fourth piece of the framework (at least, as I see it). And this is where a lot of the tension lies these days especially between conservative evangelical Christians and those who are scientifically oriented but not religious.

4. What Christian faith rejects is not science but *scientism*.

What's the difference?

The philosophy of scientism says that only the

material exists, i.e. there is no possibility of an outside force (such as God). Of course, since this exclusion is not empirically provable it is also by definition anti-scientific.^{viii}

However, science as it was first developed did not have this constraint. It was possible to “do science” while acknowledging that there was a Creator God.

What’s ironic about scientism is its logical consequence as explained in this final video – again from Ravi Zacharais International.

Let’s watch.

Video: 2 – Hasn’t Science Buried God? (3 mins)

“If atheism is true, you have every good reason not to trust your mind and to doubt the content of your thoughts. And thus you lose reason, thinking and the ability to do science in the first place.”

... which sounds an awful lot like what the Apostle Paul is talking about in his letter to the Christ-followers at Rome when he writes that people who refuse to acknowledge God in spite of the evidence presented in nature descend into 'futile thinking' and although they think they are smart, they become fools.

Jesus the Logician^{ix}

Alright, now we're going to put the science and the theoretical to rest for today and move to something a lot more practical (at least, I hope it is!). I want to show you a prime example of what Christian intelligence and rational thinking looks like ... an example that comes from Jesus of Nazareth himself.

And it's important to remember as we look at this that even though Jesus was God-in-the-flesh, He chose to limit himself while on this

earth. In other words, he didn't use Divine Superpowers to know everything. He had to learn *how to think* just like all of us do.

In Luke's biography of Jesus, we read that Mary and Joseph took him to Jerusalem at around the age of 12 and while they were in the city, they lost track of Him for three days. And when they found Him, Luke says He was "in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at His understanding and his answers."^x

Later in Jesus' life, during his ministry, one of the common reactions to him was how incredible his teaching was. One of Jesus' friends, the Apostle John, tells us that some folks once asked, "How is it that this man has learning, when He has never studied?"^{xi} ... by which they meant "formal training as a rabbi," for Jesus had studied on his own and had become a brilliant logician.

Note that I didn't say "magician" which is what a lot of people tend to think of when they think of Jesus and the miracles he did. I said "logician" – referring to his ability to use logic in advanced ways to make his point.

And, I'll admit that it sounds a little odd because hardly anyone Christian or non thinks of Jesus in this way: as a *thinker*, "addressing the same issues as an Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger or Wittgenstein, and with the same logical method."

But he did. Often.

For example, in one section of what Christians call "The Sermon on the Mount" ...

Jesus says:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit

adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Matthew 5:27-28 (NIV)

And if you’ve been around church for any time at all, you’re probably familiar with that saying. It’s similar to what Jesus said about murder and anger: *just because you don’t actually kill someone, doesn’t mean you aren’t guilty of the same root sin.* Anger that devalues and debases someone to the point of nothingness, Jesus says, is worthy of the same judgment as murder because it comes from the same root.

And literal physical adultery and lust have the same relationship. But Jesus goes on to say something right after that which sounds, quite frankly, crazy.

He says:

“If your right eye causes you to

stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” Matthew 5:29-30 (NIV)

What, exactly, is Jesus saying here? Is He advising us to literally dismember ourselves as a way of escaping hell?

Sadly, there are stories throughout history of people doing just that – taking this literally. But that wasn't Jesus' purpose at all. Jesus was engaging in a logical technique known as “reduction ad absurdum” which takes a proposition and follows it out to its logically absurd conclusion, illustrating that the initial

proposition itself was absurd.

The question, then, is how does this bizarre statement about cutting off body parts do that?

To understand, we have to put this part of Jesus' teaching into context so let's do that. Right before Jesus talks about murder and anger and then adultery and lust ...

He says this:

*"I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 5:20 (NIV)*

So what was the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Jewish religious Law?

The brilliant Christian philosopher Dallas Willard explains it as "a righteousness that took

as its goal to not do anything wrong.”

In other words, they believed “if I don’t break any of the Ten Commandments, then I am righteous. If I don’t actually kill someone or have sex with someone, then I am good.”

Now, here’s what Jesus was doing with that line of thinking.

He was saying, “OK, then, if not doing anything wrong truly is the standard, you can achieve that by dismembering yourself and thereby make wrong actions impossible. For what you *cannot* do you certainly *will not* do.”

“If remove your eye or your hand or whatever, you might be a mutilated stump but at least you will make it to Heaven. And your loss will be a small price to pay compared to the reward of heaven.”

That is the logical conclusion for one who held

the belief of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law that being righteous equals not breaking the Ten Commandments. And Jesus is just urging them to be consistent with their principles and do in practice what their principles imply.

I remember when our kids were little – and some of you are at this stage right now – when they got mad over something we had said or done and announced that they were going to run away. I remember Jetta calmly saying, “well, OK. You’re probably going to need to pack a lunch. And you’ll probably need a coat. And your PJs and underwear. And maybe a blanket and a pillow.”

And she would arrange all of those things and put them in the wagon. And the kid would start walking down the driveway. And there would be this moment like, “wait a minute. What am I doing here? This is crazy. I can’t live on my own even with all this stuff.” And they would turn

around and come back inside.

What she was doing was letting the scene play out to its logical absurd conclusion to illustrate that the original thought itself (“I ought to run away”) was absurd ... *in hopes* that they would reject that original thought and come back.

That’s what Jesus was doing here with the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law who were among the listeners. And it was brilliant.

He reduces their principle – that righteousness lies in not doing anything wrong – to the absurd, in hopes that they will forsake their principle; in hopes that the light will come on and they will enter the righteousness that is by *faith* and not outward attempts to keep the Law, especially when it was so obvious that inwardly you were not able to.

After all, even if you did dismember yourself you could still have a hateful heart toward Gods

and towards others. It wouldn't really help toward righteousness at all.

That is the basic truth Jesus is teaching in this passage ... *through an advanced form of logic* which, if you don't understand it or recognize it, makes it impossible to get His point.

Conclusion

Now, obviously, my reason for telling this story is to illustrate at least a small part the genius of Jesus to make the case that Christian faith and logic and rational thinking are not by definition incompatible. Being dumb and being a follower of Jesus are not synonymous. Never have been. Never will be.

But there's a larger point from this passage that I think I need to make as we draw this service to a close and that is the fundamental message of Christianity.

See, it's one thing to appreciate the brilliance of Jesus and the faith He founded. It's quite another to examine it and apply it to yourself ... particularly this idea of what it takes to be a righteous person. For if you believe there is a God and He is the ultimate judge of right and wrong you have to ask yourself the question: *what does it take to be counted as righteous before Him?*

Jesus in this teaching has already made it clear that it's not simply "don't break any of the Laws." Even if you somehow immobilized yourself, you would still do it in your mind and in your heart.

That's how pervasive sin is. That's how infected we all are with it. And we cannot overcome it.

That's why we need a savior.

We can be made righteous not by our vain attempts but “by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone”

As we close this morning, we’re going to do a song that I think expresses that idea: that our worthiness is not in ourselves but in Jesus and what He did for us.

And I’m going to invite you sing along. And if you’re a Christian, this is your opportunity to be reminded that it’s your faith in Jesus that makes you right before God.

If you’re *not* a Christian don’t feel like you have to sing if you don’t want to. But maybe use this time to think about what Jesus is offering to you.

So, let’s stand and sing and then we’ll be dismissed.

- Reminder that you can come for prayer down front.

Congregational Song – My Worth Is Not in What I Own

Richard dismisses everyone

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2015/04/08/398227737/what-the-god-of-the-gaps-teaches-us-about-science>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/all-truth-gods-truth-reformed-approach-science-and-scripture/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Colossians 2:3

^{iv} Mark Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*, quoted at https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus_christ_and_the_life_of_the_mind

^v http://christianevidence.org/blog/entry/pushing_the_limits_of_science/

^{vi} <http://strangenotions.com/gods-philosophers/>

^{vii} See www.testoffaith.com

^{viii} <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/science-vs-science/>

^{ix} This section is based on Dallas Willard's excellent treatise on the subject at <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=39>

^x Luke 2:46-47

^{xi} John 7:15