

Two things have happened to me this week that have made me think rather intensely about the path I've taken in life, and how radically it has swerved from the paths of others who were like me at the age of 20. I emphasize "who were like me." The reality is that the path I was on already at 20 was (now I see) extremely weird, and to outsiders looks more than a little bizarre. I was a hard-core evangelical Christian dedicated to ministry for the sake of the gospel. Not exactly what most 20-year olds (including any of my many high school friends) were doing at the time. If ever I want a conversation-stopper at a cocktail party, all I need do is say something about my past.

Still, given that as my starting point, what happened next is even more highly unusual. And I was abruptly reminded of it this week, twice. First, on Monday I had a radio/podcast debate here in London on "Premier Christian Radio" (it is the leading Christian radio station in England) (not that it has a lot of competition, but it is indeed a high class operation) with another scholar of the New Testament, Peter Williams, one of the world's experts on ancient Syriac as it relates to the Bible (both OT and NT), former professor at the University of Aberdeen and current head of Tyndale House in Cambridge:

<http://legacy.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/peter-williams>.

I have known Pete for years; he is a committed evangelical Christian with a view of the infallibility of the Bible. Our debate was on the question of whether the Gospels are historically reliable (a topic of frequent recurrence on this blog, obviously) (some bloggers may think "interminable" recurrence). He thinks there is not a single mistake in the Gospels, of any kind. I think there are. You've heard this kind of debate before, so I won't be recounting the ins and outs (although they were quite different from those you've seen before; still, it won't matter for this post).

The second thing that happened is that I received a Facebook post from a former friend (I emphasize "former" since we apparently are no longer friendly) and classmate of mine from my Moody Bible Institute days (mid 70s), in which he lambasted the fellow alumni from my graduating class for holding me in any kind of esteem. The implication of his lambast was that I'm the enemy of the truth and no one should respect me or my views. I haven't talked with this fellow for over 40 years, but last I knew we were friends, on the same floor in the dorm and the same basketball team. OK, I couldn't hit a jump shot, but still, is that reason to be upset four decades later?

In any event, these two events made me think hard about one issue in particular, one that I keep coming back to in my head, in my life, and, occasionally, on this blog: why is it that some people are willing to change their minds about what they hold most dear and important in their lives and other people retain their same views, come hell or high water? Why do some people explore options and think about whether they were originally "right" or not (about religion, personal ethics, social issues, politics, etc.), and other people cling tenaciously to the views they were given when they were 14 years old? It's an interesting question.

Because I changed my views on something near and dear to me and my then-friends, I'm a persona non grata in the circles I used to run around in. And granted, I have zero desire (OK, far less than zero) to run around in them now. But I don't feel any animosity toward my former friends, or think they're going to roast in hell because of their views, and wish that torment would begin sooner than later. I understand why they do (toward me), but it's sad and disheartening.

Let me be clear, my (current) scholar-friend Peter Williams and I are on very good terms (after our debate he bought me lunch and we had a lovely talk about his current research projects): there's no animosity there or wish for me to speed the process of passing off my mortal coil, at all. Though I bet if you press him he would regretfully inform you that I probably will be roasting in hell. Still, that's OK; it's what he thinks.

What I'm more interested in is why I would have changed my mind and others like him absolutely don't. Even scholars. Their views significantly deepen, become more sophisticated, more nuanced - but the views don't change. (My sense of my former classmates at Moody - at least the ones I hear about - is that their views don't even deepen or grow more sophisticated; they literally think pretty much the same thing as they did when they were mid-teenagers, only now with more conviction and passion).

The reason I find the whole matter sad is almost entirely personal (I guess sadness by definition is). My former evangelical friends and current evangelical debate partners think I'm an enemy of the truth, when I've spent almost my entire weird journey trying to come to the truth. And so far as I can tell, they haven't. I'm not trying to be ungenerous, but it does seem to me to be the reality.

I'll try to put it in the most direct terms here: how is it at all plausible, or humanly possible, that someone can question, explore, look into, consider the beliefs they were taught as a young child (in the home, in church, in ... whatever context) and after 40 years of thinking about it decide that everything they were taught is absolutely right? The views \*they\* were taught, out of the sixty trillion possible views out there, are absolutely right? The problem with these particular views (of evangelical Christianity) is that if they are indeed right, everyone else in the known universe is wrong and going to be tormented forever because of it.

I know most Christians don't think this: I'm just talking about this particular type of Christian. And they don't seem to see how strange it is that they are right because they agree with what they were taught as young children. Yes, they don't see it that way. They think they are right because they agree with the Bible which comes from God so they agree with God and I (and everyone else on the planet) disagree with God. But the reality is that this is the view they were handed as young kids.

I realize these are very old questions. When we were evangelicals we puzzled over the question of how God could punish people for eternity for not "accepting Christ" when they had never even heard of him. Unfortunately, we concluded that we weren't sure how he would do that, but we were pretty sure he would.

Most of the human race, of course, thinks the very idea is ludicrous. But what I'm puzzled by is not \*that\*, but by the fact that thinking human beings (as opposed to non-thinking ones) can actually still subscribe to such nonsense. And it's a troubling idea to me precisely because those are the roots I come from.

This is not an issue for most blog members, but possibly for some. I have a few more reflections on it - specifically with respect to my debate - that I think I'll reflect on in the next post. (I'll get back to the authorship of the letter of James! But for now this is on my mind.)

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