

I've decided to address two personal questions in this week's Readers' Mailbag, one about why I don't want to call myself a Christian and the other about where the idea for this blog came from. If you have questions you would like me to address, either personal or dealing with anything having to do with the NT and the history of early Christianity, just make a comment on any post and ask them!

### **QUESTION:**

I find it interesting that you and Lüdemann each create an extremely narrow rule separating Christians from non-Christians and then use it to exclude yourselves from Christianity. It is almost as if you somehow intuitively sense that you should not define yourself as being within Christianity, so you take up a narrow rule that "all Christians must believe in physical resurrection" or whatever, so you can declare that you are not a Christian. Not being a Christian is the goal, and making up a rule is the means. What do you think? Faced with similar dissonance, some others find a broader definition of "Christian" that lets them remain within the fold.

### **RESPONSE**

This is a question that was raised by my post by Gerd Lüdemann dealing with the question of Jesus' resurrection. I will not try to answer for him, but will talk about just me and my views.

When it comes to me, I actually do not have a very narrow understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and I certainly am not bound and determined to define a Christian in such a way so that I don't fit the definition. Quite the contrary! I would be happy indeed to be able to call myself a Christian, since I do very much want to live a life following the ethical principles that I think are central to the Christian message, in which love of others is a driving force. But I just don't see how I can, in good conscience, call myself a Christians. I wish it were otherwise, but alas.

I certainly do not have very rigorous theological requirements for anyone who considers themselves a Christian, and I can understand why some people with very much my views of things would have no qualms about calling themselves Christian. But I can't. Before explaining, let me stress that I do not think that someone has to believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus to be a Christian, or the divinity of Christ, or the virgin birth, or ... well, or most of anything else about Christ, theologically.

Others - especially lots of Christians - would disagree with me on that. Many Christians think that you are not really a Christian unless you pass a kind of theological litmus test. I don't think so. I know Christians who don't believe any of these things. BUT, they do at least believe in God and they think that in some sense Jesus reveals God. For some Jesus is God incarnate. For others Jesus shows what God is like. For others Jesus' ethical teachings reveal how God wants people to live. For others, even more vaguely, Jesus shows the best way to be.

But for me personally - again, I don't impose this view on anyone, and each person, as far as I'm concerned, is free to have their own opinions on the matter - for me personally, I think

anyone who wants to call themselves Christian ought at the very least to (1) believe there is some kind of God in the world (a superior divine being of some kind) and (2) think that Jesus somehow reveals that God or makes access to that God possible or ... or anything else that makes Jesus important in relationship to that God.

My difficulty is that I do not believe any such God exists. I don't believe there is anything like a superior divine being in the world/universe/multiverse. I don't think there are any spiritual essences of any kind in the world, non-material beings of any sort. I don't think we ourselves can exist as spiritual, non-material beings. I think that all there is, is somehow either matter or completely tied to matter. We are here, yes, by time-matter-and-chance. Our soul doesn't exist apart from our body and our mind doesn't exist apart from our body. And no other soul or mind does either.

I absolutely do think that the core of the Christian teaching about how one should live for others is how I personally want to model my life. If that makes me a Christian in someone else's mind, I have no trouble with that. But I am reluctant to call myself Christian because I think it does injustice to others who think that if you're agnostic or atheist, you are more or less disqualified. (I have played with the idea of calling myself a Christian atheist, and I actually like that label. But only if the term atheist is consistently part of it!)

## **QUESTION**

A blog such as yours couldn't just drop out of the sky. Share with us sometime how the idea germinated in your mind, and the necessary planning and procedures that led up to it. Thanks!

## **RESPONSE**

Actually, the idea was given to me by a friend who happens to be a member now of the blog. I was going to give his name, but since I haven't asked his permission, I think maybe I shouldn't. He's a UNC alum who has traveled on some of my alumni trips with me. I think it was on one of those trips, late at night, at a bar with a couple of other friends, he sprang the idea on me of having a blog that would charge money.

I didn't know what he meant. How can you charge money for a blog? He replied: Just have a membership fee. You could make tons of money, he said. I don't need any more money, I replied. He thought for a second and said: you could give the money to charity. Hmm.. Now \*that's\* an interesting idea.

We talked briefly about how it would work, and then ordered some more drinks.....

I thought about the idea for a while. Then a longer while. Then for a couple of years. Seemed like it would be a ton of work. Then I broached the idea with Steven Ray, my computer assistant who, at the time, had redesigned my personal website for me. We talked options. On and off for months. Finally I decided I would like to bite the bullet, and just do it.

It was a lot of work to get it up and going. OK, Steven did most of the work. But still. I had to start a tax-exempt organization, the Bart Ehrman Foundation. We had to figure out how

to set it up, technologically. I had to figure how I would do it in terms of posts, topics, organization, and so on. The problem was that we really didn't have any models for this kind of thing. A blog with 5-6 posts a week, each of a thousand words? That charges money? Really? How long would I have anything to say? A year or two? How much money would we raise? Maybe \$20k a year? Would it be worth my time and effort? Who would pay Steven for his work (this is part of his day job, after all)? How would the monies be distributed? To what charities? There were hundreds of issues that had to be resolved.

But we came up with answers. They may not be the best answers, but the blog does seem to work. I post 5-6 times a week. I rarely find myself typing up a new post that is the same as some other post I've done already a few years ago (though I do now do the "Blast from the Past" every week or two). And we're raising a lot of money. Frankly, we are behind what we raised last year, and I'm not sure what to do about that, but we are indeed raising a lot of money. By next year our overall total amount raised will be over \$400k. A lot of money. All going to good causes.

So that's the short story of how it started. Thanks to all of you for helping make it happen! Please spread the word!

**IF YOU DON'T BELONG TO THE BLOG YET, JOIN!!! It costs about two bucks a month, and for that you get TONS of good stuff. All money's go to charity! You'll be helping yourself, helping your neighbor, and helping the universe as we know it!!**



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