

ROBERT D. HEATON

Ph.D. in Religious & Theological Studies
Specialties in New Testament, Christian Origins & Early Christianity
Email: dr.robheaton@gmail.com | Website: robheaton.com

Personal Statement of Faith

MY JOURNEY

As I understand it to be used most often in the New Testament, faith (πίστις) revolves around a relational dependency of trust in God and in Jesus Christ. I hold that the revelation of Jesus, through its after-effects in early Christian communities and the writing of scriptures that later came to form the New Testament, remains the vital causative event in the life of the church, and that our primary duty as Christ-followers is to discern with trust and reason how to navigate this life in a manner faithful to that revelation. Therefore, this statement will be less a set of theological propositions than a recounting of the narrative that has brought me to the present day, including a record of that journey as expressed through key mentors.

Although I was raised in various Protestant traditions (Lutheran–Missouri Synod, United Church of Christ, and Evangelical Free), and in my high school days I latched onto service mission trips as the most authentic expression of my faith, the process of taking ownership of my faith and belief only meaningfully took shape during and after the last years of my undergraduate career. Specifically, this was jump-started in 2006, during my final year studying at Miami University, when I enrolled in a Religious Studies course—REL 336, “Jesus and the Gospels”—to fulfill my one remaining liberal arts requirement. I believed that my own ecumenical Christian upbringing and lifelong immersion in Sunday School, youth group, and the church would allow me to glide through the course with relative ease. Instead, I was introduced to a veritable life-altering world of open inquiry to solve outstanding problems that I never knew existed, such as the historical Jesus and the Synoptic Problem. The course challenged many assumptions I held dear, but propelled me forward in ways that I could not have imagined, all led by a Greek Orthodox professor who first demonstrated how an honest search for truth need not fear the conclusions of excellent scholarship regarding, for example, the authorship of the New Testament and the literary relationships between the canonical gospels.

At the same time, I began to question why those in a typical church setting were uninterested in these questions and lines of inquiry, and furthermore, how students who learn advanced mathematics and hard sciences during the weekdays can progress through their high school years with no exposure to historical criticism on the weekends. Nevertheless, while consuming Barnes & Noble-level biblical studies for a time and seeking a faith tradition in Indianapolis that I felt was sensitive to my disinterest in creeds, early in our marriage my wife and I settled at Church at the Crossing thanks to her own Church of God connections and the opportunity to work with the church’s youth. Shortly thereafter, a deeply impactful mentorship developed at Anderson University with Fred Shively, who spent many hours in conversation with me. One day in Greek class, in the context of discussing hymnody that often is dated theologically by many centuries, he encouraged students not to sing lines or words to which they did not or could not personally assent. Never before was I permitted this kind of personal liberty to inspect received theology; instead, the expectation had previously been that I repeat verbatim the words established by my predecessors. I am forever indebted to this committed churchman and scholar for exemplifying a faith that is completely harmonious with asking the difficult questions and pursuing their answers responsibly.

These touchstone memories and moments have combined to produce a unique form of Christian faith: one thoroughly rooted in love and relationship that yet treasures the tradition of intellectual freedom to discover new ways to tackle pertinent questions of Christian living. Because I can lay no special claim to personal revelation, I chiefly understand God and Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible, where all the tools

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of critical inquiry have come, through many years of dedicated study, to be at my disposal. Mine is therefore an undeniably “academic” Christianity, and I seek to be equally permissive of my students in order that they might find their own faith under the wings of similar non-coercive guidance. I especially place great value on the liberal arts educational program, since it once jolted me from my comfortable ignorance. Crucially, this formative background has helped me to see the human activity underlying much of the church’s theology. Yet, I can remain in conversation and communion with people who disagree with me, even vehemently, because I believe that constant devoted evaluation of our theology is consistent with the refreshing and reconciling ministry of God’s Spirit.

Significantly, the Church of God has fostered my development in myriad integral ways and permitted me to participate in this mission of biblical reconciliation of a slightly different sort than usual—that is, helping to reconcile the church to the contents of its Bible. In this fashion, the pursuit of biblical studies itself is the mission to which I dedicate my life’s work. While serving as a T.A. for Fred Shively and in my short time adjuncting for the School of Theology & Christian Ministry recently, I have been able to observe the fruits of this labor while introducing the wide world of New Testament and Early Christian Studies to students with a pre-existing Christian background—especially how many have come to a fuller appreciation of their Christian scriptures through this study. I feel both the weight and the responsibility to pass on what I have learned, and I stand equipped to guide undergraduate and graduate students alike on their own journeys of discovery, scholarship, and ownership and expression of their faith.

At the same time, I recognize that my faith story and my perspective on critical inquiry is not a typical or normative Church of God experience, and some questions are unconscionable to more conservative students. I have found that I can still speak to these students, although it requires—much as I have experienced in my own life—an all-important relationship of trust and the occasional heart-to-heart moment of personal, existential questioning. For example, in the Spring of 2023 I received an impassioned message from a seminary student wanting to understand first if I even identified as Christian, and second if I could explain my views on scriptural authority—presumably because it felt to him as though we were unduly “picking apart” the Bible. As a conclusion to this statement of faith, I offer my response to this student only lightly edited, for example, to remove personally identifiable data:

Yes, I identify as Christian, although I realize that may perplex some people who don’t recognize a form of Christianity that doesn’t obsess over credal formulations or whatnot (not saying this is your perspective, but it certainly exists because I’ve encountered it before). Nevertheless, the Christian tradition I was raised in has proven tolerant of this perspective that Brian McLaren has called “a generous orthodoxy.” And Jesus still intrigues me and appeals to me, perhaps because I am just as attracted to the enduring value of the questions as I am the answers traditionally given.

Anyway, your question reminds me of a paper I wrote in seminary that got me in some trouble with the systematic theology professor at the time. We were asked to respond to the prompt, “What kind of book is the Bible?” Naturally, I (having just recently read Bart Ehrman’s *Forged*) sharpened my pen and emphasized the human nature of the anthology of books, or book of books, that came together as the Bible. Having also come from a communications/public relations type of background, I applied the social communication theory of groupthink to the Bible as well. And yet at the end of the paper, I returned to a formulation of the Bible as holy (i.e., set apart for religious use) book, as a holy book that contains multitudes, from beauty to ugliness, from truth to polemic, and for modern faith, from everlasting to extraneous.

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If I could rewrite that essay today, I would do so from a different perspective, but I would still accentuate the human nature of all processes involved, from the writing of individual books to selection of the canonical collection. This is not to abrogate the possibility of divine inspiration, but insists that the sacred literature is yet literature of human composition, treasuring, preservation, alteration, and collection, all of which is borne out of my work not only on noncanonical texts like the *Shepherd*, but also from my awareness of the many difficult issues in other areas not of my own immediate specialization, like the Synoptic Problem, pseudepigraphy in the Pauline and Catholic Letters, the difficulty of reconstituting the Johannine community, and so on. And thus, without even plumbing into the Old Testament for this response, I would explain the Bible as the collective faith-inspired record of very human attempts to comprehend and explicate the activity of God, from which it is occasionally merited, if not demanded of us, to exercise our rational faculties to select from those competing interpretations what is valid for the modern life of faith and what must be deemed incompatible. For as Justin Martyr wrote in the second century in his defense of Christianity addressed to the emperor:

“Reason dictates those who are pious for truth and lovers of wisdom to honor and desire only what is true, refusing to follow the opinions of the ancients, whenever they are worthless” (*1 Apol.* 2.1).

Ultimately, this kind of reasoning compels me to account historically for the phenomena that we as scholars observe in the Bible, and especially within my background of the New Testament. I participate, furthermore, in a human rights perspective on historiography (accounting for the motivations and beliefs of human subjects with accuracy and in context, so as to memorialize the past in accordance with modern notions of human rights) elucidated by the likes of Antoon de Baets and Annette Merz. This is why, for example, I’ve banged the apocalyptic eschatology drum so hard both last semester and this, not because I believe that the world is coming to a consummation anytime soon or because I think my students should adopt this belief, but because it—and the leftover tracks of transitioning away from immediacy to a place of either far-off or realized eschatology—explains so well the worldview of the earliest Christians and the writing that would happen in the name of Paul and the other apostles.

Hopefully this little narrative does something to answer your question. Thank you for asking the questions delicately, recognizing the vulnerability they require. I recognize that the answers I offer, both to you and to the many questions posed by our courses, are partial and temporary, but they are worth considering, are they not? And if these are the kinds of answers I offer to the questions we have encountered, whether about the Bible broadly or a more specific issue within that “book of books,” how could I not allow them to affect my faith? If in teaching these classes I am perhaps too permissive of the questions or tentative toward the answers in the process, that is a fault of mine I will have to accept. But I think everyone here is capable of arriving at their own conclusions and substantiating their perspectives, without need for me to enforce specific boundaries.

The final point of this interaction is important to stress: I recognize that my faith journey and my perspective is uniquely my own. I do not strive to make disciples of Rob Heaton, but rather to give students the resources and experience with critical scholarship that will enhance the formation of their own journeys of discipleship in Jesus Christ.