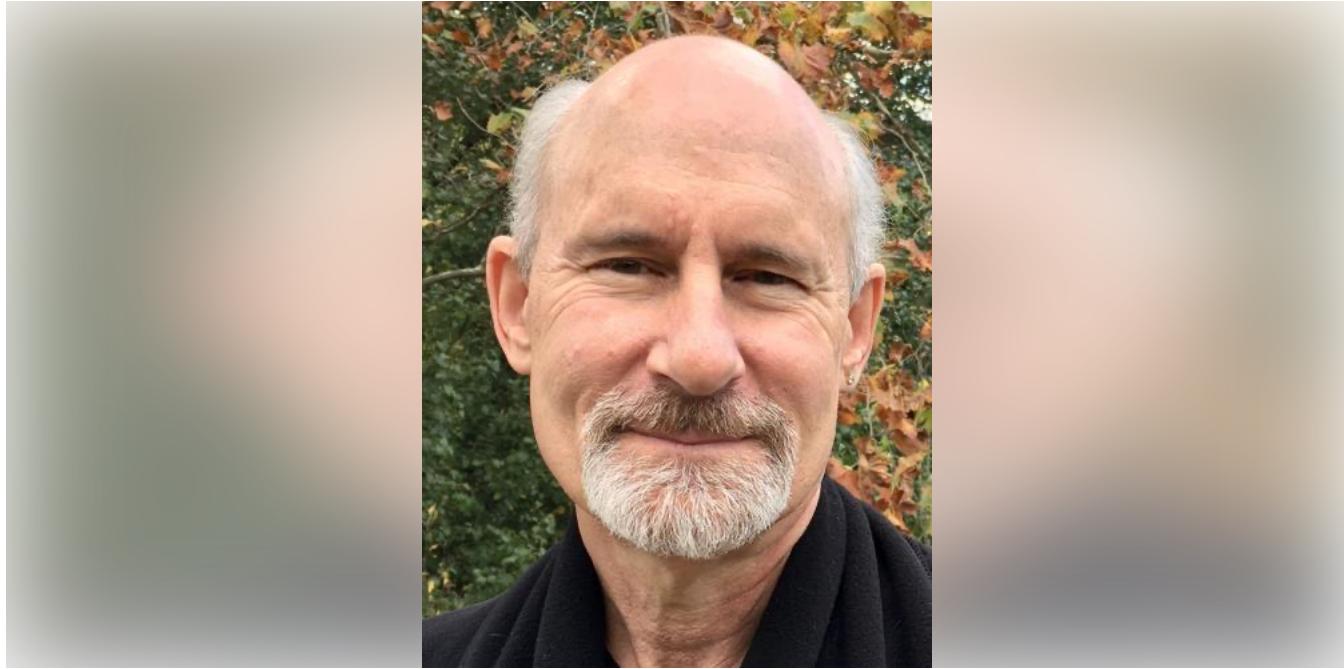


Friendly Freethinker: Come Home to Faith (or Else)

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A former Christian colleague posted his belief that the message of the Bible is an invitation to "come home."

Partially tongue-in-cheek, I replied: "Yes, come home, or else." It's popular in "Progressive Christian" circles to focus on the more positive messages of the biblical tradition. Many are not ignorant of the "bad parts" of the narrative, but they can be dismissive of passages that support oppression (of women, slaves, etc), explaining these as an obsolete way of believing, reformed and transformed somehow by Jesus. They focus on the more "positive" verses of the ancient text.

I once considered myself a "Progressive Christian," since I read the Bible "prophetically"—emphasizing passages about justice, peacemaking and inclusiveness—overlooking the otherworldly parts. I don't see anything wrong with that view, it's just very selective of the more "radical" elements in the much larger framework of scripture. My ministry was based on that selective perspective. For me, and other Progressive (or "Liberal") Christians who joined in the work, the call of Christ was one of action rather than belief. Yet, when it came right down to it, the whole outlook and program was about faith, even if faith meant "progressive" activity. Though more liberal Christians can be fairly tolerant of various faiths—even welcoming a partnership with non-believers—there remains a touch of exclusiveness related to the "or else" dimension. Jesus may be "progressive" in their minds, but was he really?

In my reading of the Bible (based on many years of study, teaching and preaching) I might conclude, from beginning to end—Genesis to Revelation—it presents a simple choice: believe, or else. I don't see how anyone can explain that away, let alone defend it. As Joshua stated rather succinctly to the people of Israel: "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24—one basis of Billy Graham's preaching "the hour of decision"). The choice is crystal clear: believe, or else. Or else God will be unhappy; or else God will punish you; or else you will be lost for eternity; or else life will have no meaning, and on and on. Or else. You're in or you're out; one of us, or not. Interesting that one biblical expression for this is "The Chosen." "We are chosen; you aren't." (I don't often get that sense from Jewish friends and colleagues, but I sure hear it explicitly or implicitly from many Christians).

A Fundamentalist might say: Believe, or Hell! An Evangelical: Forget Religion, Follow Jesus—He loves you, and wants to welcome you Home. A mainline Christian: Faith gives you a Faith Family and makes you happy. A Progressive Christian: Jesus wasn't so interested in being Christian; He was concerned with Justice, Equality and Love. Oversimplifying? Of course. Yet one underlying message of all types of Christians is: Having faith in Jesus is central, however you define that or show that. One view says: If you don't have faith in Jesus, you're lost. Another says: We have no idea why you wouldn't believe, and no idea what God will do with you.

Now let's consider the concept of "coming home." This runs deep in most forms of Christianity. Home to faith; home to the church; home to the Lord; home to heaven. The main implication—quite explicit actually—is that "this world," the old earth, can never be home for the person of faith. For the Christian, home must always be "over yonder" in God's Great Home above. Our homeland is not here, it's over there, over the river, passing over beyond death to be embraced by all believers in the great homecoming.

"I've got a home in gloryland that outshines the sun," we once sang. Our home is above, so we can't wait to go. Who wouldn't want to go home with us? Many are genuinely sorrowful that people don't want to go to their vision of "home." Underlying this is the old notion, unspoken and perhaps unconscious, that everyone who chooses not to "come home" is choosing the "way of destruction," the path to hell. After all, if you aren't willing to come home, God's eternal home, then the alternative has to be very bad. You're left out in the cold, or in the case of early Christian scriptures, you can keep nice and warm in the fires of eternal torment.

As I say, some are dismissive of the oppressive or sectarian aspects of scripture. In my experience, those passages can be taken as challenges to decisively act on behalf of those who are oppressed, distressed or disempowered. The problem remains the same: If this is "God's Word," how can a believer pick and choose what to take seriously for today?

Could it be time to "come home" to something else?

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