

Daniel Kirchhofer – Easter 2013 Testimony

When John Hanneman asked me to share my testimony on Easter Sunday, my first thought was: why should I do this? It took some pondering and some not-so-gentle pushes from my wife to say "yes." When I came to America some time ago I was completely unprepared for the American practice of 'sharing.' I never heard of anyone 'sharing' their faith, their addictions, or their dysfunctional family situations. This was all new to me. But here I am, quite well adapted despite years of fighting it. I finally reasoned that there may be some people here today who are in a similar situation as I was many years ago, and that the account of my journey may encourage them and help them with their own struggles.

I have witnessed many Easter testimonies and it is amazing how different they are. The story of my conversion has no road-to-Damascus drama in it; it is one of a long and slowly progressing journey with many struggles and many gentle pushes by caring Christians.

I am a research scientist at Genentech, a biotech company, where I work in drug discovery in the biochemistry department. My training as a scientist has made me very skeptical about everything, including religious questions. And this has contributed a lot to the length of my journey.

I was born in Switzerland as the only child of my parents. I grew up in small towns in the German speaking part of the country and was educated by the strict and disciplined Swiss school system. Our home was very quiet, very private and very catholic. My father made sure I was brought up the Roman Catholic way, which had a lasting influence on me. During my teenage and early college years in the late 70s I strayed away from both church and God, which was one and the same for me. After finishing grad school in Zurich, I left Switzerland for a three year postdoctoral fellowship at a cancer research institute in San Diego. At that point I was a full-blown atheist. I still vividly remember my first encounter with what I thought was the American way of Christianity. I didn't know anyone in San Diego and being alone in my studio on a Sunday morning, I flipped through the TV channels and came across some Evangelical Sunday broadcast; I was totally in shock as the preacher seemed to fix his eyes on me and demanded me to touch the TV screen with my hands so that his prayers could reach me. My head was spinning; after the somber and heavy Swiss Catholicism there was now this crazy American version of Christianity. I was quite repulsed and felt reassured with my choice of staying away from anything religious. My spiritual future looked very grim at that point.

In San Diego I met my future wife Elsie. This was also the prelude to major changes heading my way. Elsie herself had walked away from God during her college years after being raised in a Pentecostal Chinese church as the pastor's daughter.

We married in 1990 and moved back to Switzerland where I started my first job. Elsie found her way back to her faith within the first year of our marriage. She gently forced me to go to an English-speaking church with her and with our three

girls, which were born in Switzerland within our first three years there. I became a reluctant but regular churchgoer. I was very skeptical and critical about Christianity and after listening to the sermons I made cynical comments to my wife and asked her all kinds of impossible question. This led to many regular Sunday afternoon fights and became a dark cloud hanging over our marriage. This did not change after we eventually moved back to the US, to Los Altos in 1997, after which we started going to PBCC. Little did I know that since our early days in Switzerland, Elsie and many other church members had been praying for my salvation. Little did *they* know that this would go on for another twelve years.

What were my issues?

First: my strong skepticism towards Christianity and anything religious. This attitude was also fueled by my scientific mindset and my daily work in biomedical research; there seemed to be no place for God, only for hard facts, and for experiments to prove or disprove. I believed that Bible stories were just myths. I was a real pain for every believer and not pleasant to be around.

Second: my pride and my lack of humility. This was a part of my character, but also stemmed from intellectual snobbery, which was based on my opinion that science could explain everything.

Third: I did not know any scientist who was a Christian; therefore, I assumed that Christians must be just plain stupid or in need of believing in something (no matter how absurd) to keep their lives afloat. I could not have been more wrong.

It was by God's grace that I was able to overcome these issues during the course of my long journey, which was basically a series of intellectual struggles. By plodding along with Elsie and the girls to the Sunday services I was exposed to the Bible, and this was not without effect; it raised my curiosity to examine certain aspects of the Christian belief, albeit with a great bias. I also encountered believers who patiently listened to my tirades and gently pushed me along the way.

The first important question was about the accuracy of the books of the bible. I strongly doubted their credibility and was convinced that the passage of time must have added to the myth. This question was quickly settled after doing some research and reading FF Bruce's seminal book, *The Canon of Scripture*.

Another huge step for me was the realization that there actually existed scientists who were strong believers. In Switzerland, a dear family friend gave me a book entitled *The Fingerprint of God* written by Hugh Ross, an astrophysicist and a Christian. This got me going. I found more books written by scientists, among them those by the British physicist-turned-pastor and apologeticist John Polkinghorne, which made strong impressions on me. Even if these books did not give me the ultimate proof I was looking for, they showed me that there is no contradiction between God's Word spoken to us through the Bible and God's created world, the book of nature, which was the realm of my scientific exploration.

Finally, the lucid writings of CS Lewis clarified a lot about my questions concerning the nature of "sin", the reality of God, repentance and the need for

salvation through faith in his son Jesus Christ. Yet, I was still sitting on the fence and unable to commit. Living in the grey zone became really uncomfortable; I knew that what the Bible says is not grey but black and white. The pastor of the church we went to in Basel, Switzerland took a strong interest in my situation and did a lot to help me on my way. I remember one evening after doing his best to answer many of my questions, he said to me, "Daniel, I see you are standing in the river; you already got your feet wet and can't get back on dry land, but you are afraid to jump in and swim." This basically summed it up for me, but I kept on resisting and it took a few more years for me to finally take the 'plunge'.

There was one particular thing I had a hard time dealing with: I was concerned about what would happen to me if I were take the 'plunge.' I was afraid that I would have to give up my freedom, the control over myself, that I couldn't be myself anymore. I could not have been more wrong with this outlook! Little did I know that by trusting our Lord and by committing my life into his hands I would gain a new and greater freedom unimaginable to me at that time.

I think of one book in particular which really helped me to finish the last leg of my long journey. It is a well written book on 'Christian Apologetics' by two Christian professors of philosophy at Boston College (Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli). In this book I also read about Pascal's wager. Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist and Christian writer during the 17th century and he formulated the 'wager' for undecided seekers. It goes like this: you know that logical reasoning cannot decide for or against the existence of God; you must "wager" where are you going to place your bet. If you place it with God, you lose nothing, even if it turns out that God does not exist. But if you place it against God, and you are wrong and God does exist, you lose everything: God, eternity, heaven, and infinite gain. There are obviously some problems with this wager concept, since it appeals to selfishness and fear. But it really spoke to me at that time.

You may be curious to find out what the decisive moment of my conversion was. The answer is: it was quite unspectacular. It happened during communion after a sermon on the book of Revelations by our own pastor B. Bell in 2001. I was 44 years old. For so many years I had watched the communion elements being passed along, but I had never participated. When we started going to PBC, I proudly refused the bread and wine, but lately it had become a disturbing reminder of my untenable situation. Well at this particular Sunday and for the first time since I had left the Catholic Church as a teenager, I again took part in communion; however this time it was very different. This time it was my decision, the culmination of a long journey. It was final and it was undoable. In this way I was silently acknowledging God as my creator and his son Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Recently, my wife Elsie pointed out that in his autobiography called *Surprised by Joy*, CS Lewis admitted to a similarly unspectacular conversion moment: "I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut...the choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I chose to open...by taking part in that communion I said, "I choose". My Baptism followed a few years later, much to

the chagrin of my Catholic father who said, "you've been baptized already; what's that all about?"

The next part of my journey was the more joyful part; it was the deepening of my understanding of my new faith, growing closer to God and enjoying the fellowship of my new family in Christ. A key event that tremendously helped to strengthen my new-found faith was the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, which is a Society of Christian academic professors and scientists across the United States. The keynote speaker was Dr. Francis Collins, a famous geneticist and current director of the National Institutes of Health. He had discovered the gene for cystic fibrosis and he was heading the human genome project to decipher the entire human DNA code. I was struck by the open profession of his faith and his journey from being an atheist to becoming a believer. It was a new and wonderful experience to be among fellow scientists who were also Christians. We all went to church on Sunday morning and I was deeply moved to hear them all sing the 'Doxology' at the end of the service: a bunch of grey-haired professors who proclaim Jesus Christ as their savior.

After becoming a Christian, the problems I previously had with some scripture passages did not magically evaporate, but still remain. However, they have become much less important for me, and my faith is not dependent on their resolution.

My work as a scientist has not gotten any easier; in fact it seems as difficult as ever. However, the difference is that now I see my work as a great privilege to explore God's beautiful creation in such great detail. Every now and then, when we make a new discovery in my lab, it can actually become an almost holy moment. Quite recently my postdoctoral fellow and I were staring at a computer screen which showed the molecular structure of our newly discovered protein at atomic resolution. I realized that we were probably the first human beings to look at it and to have that glimpse into the unimaginable depths of God's created world. This was a moment when I thanked and glorified our Almighty God.

There have also been some very painful experiences over the past few years, such as the loss of both my parents back in Switzerland. Yet strangely enough, this only deepened my faith, as I had to completely rely on God to help me, to guide me and to give me strength.

Finally, I hope that this account of my journey will encourage anyone who is seeking right now or anyone who is close to someone who is seeking. You can rest assured that God has not abandoned you and that He is patiently waiting. But it is up to you to make the next move. As it is written in the gospel of Matthew (7:7): "Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."