

Apologetics in Action:

An evangelistic role-play with Dallas Willard

We asked Dallas to role-play an evangelistic conversation with a 20 year old girl who grew up in a Christian home, but finds her worldview challenged when she goes to college. She decides to see her pastor and says, "I used to believe strongly in the Christian faith, but now I think that there are many ways to see the world, and that, just because they differ, doesn't mean they are right or wrong." How would you answer her?

I would start by saying that whether someone is a Christian or not, they are going to live according to certain assumptions about what is real. They are very likely to accept the popular notion that they live in a world where there really is no God, and that right and wrong are determined by what you want, as long as it doesn't conflict with someone else's freedom.

We have to start by helping people see that they cannot escape the fact that, no matter what they do, they are in fact choosing one version of what is real, true, and good. In that choice they need to be responsible. Not believing in something has exactly the same consequences as believing.

So, this girl says: "OK, I understand-you are saying that I have to believe." I'm saying that she has a belief. This is absolutely crucial for her to understand. Otherwise she is under the illusion that she is in a safe place simply because she hasn't explicitly committed herself to something.

She says: "OK, I want to believe. But I fear that in coming back to the church I would have to pretend that I am certain about some things that I feel like I can never be certain about again."

This is a common case. This is why people prefer a non-committal position. People have been sold this idea that, whether in culture, politics or religion, in order to commit to an idea they have to be absolutely certain-and absolutely certain that everything else is wrong. That's where I would say to her: "No, you don't have to be certain about anything you're not certain about. In fact, certainty is not something you can choose, anyway. Certainty and uncertainty are not things that are under the will."

She says, "You are telling me I could be a Christian, and still have doubts?" That's right. It is possible to go to heaven with a lot of doubts, and it is possible to go to hell with a lot of certainty-people do it every day. But you cannot stay at such an abstract level for very long. You're going to have to bring it down to a practical level with questions like: what do you believe about Jesus?

"Okay," she says, "I can acknowledge that. You know, I have read the gospels, and I think that Jesus was the greatest teacher there ever was. In fact, I'd like to live my life like him. But it feels like I have to 'buy' an awful lot more."

What I would say is this: you don't have to buy anything you don't want. We have to help people understand that belief is something that comes along as you experience. You don't have to fake anything. The way faith works is this: you put into practice what you believe. If you're attracted to Jesus, what do you believe about him that you can act on? Experience shows again and again that when you allow people to act on the little that they do believe, the rest will follow.

"But I still struggle with how I should view those who have other beliefs. I'm not sure I am ready to condemn them as wrong. I know some very good Buddhists. What is their destiny?"

I would take her to Romans 2:6-10: "God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."

What Paul is clearly saying is that if anyone is worthy of being saved, they will be saved. At that point many Christians get very anxious, saying that absolutely no one is worthy of being saved. The implication of that is that a person can be almost totally good, but miss the message about Jesus, and be sent to hell. What kind of a God would do that? I am not going to stand in the way of anyone whom God wants to save. I am not going to say "he can't save them." I am happy for God to save anyone he wants in any way he can. It is possible for someone who does not know Jesus to be saved. But anyone who is going to be saved is going to be saved by Jesus. "There is no other name given under heaven by which men can be saved."

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