



Faith Is Not in the Landing, But in the Launching:
A Round Table Conversation on Certainty
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Mark Ramsey: Friends, this is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, here with my colleagues Beth Daniel and Adam Mixon. Ryan Burge, whom many of you know from his Substack “Graphs About Religion”, offers up a lot of glimpses of what American religion is doing in this time. And this week, he published an article with data entitled “Belief Isn’t Dying, It’s Just Getting Less Certain”.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I had this feeling, while I was going through the numbers, that the loss of certainty — or the diminishing of certainty — among those who do believe in God is actually a good thing. And it’s actually a guardrail against being dogmatic, or putting God in a box, or creating a god in our own image that is no God at all. So for me then, it repositions the church as a place where people don’t necessarily come and find certainty, but they find a place to ask their questions and wrestle with these things in community. And while they may not establish a certainty, they may grow in confidence in ways that’s meaningful and transformative.

Beth Daniel: I think an important thing to say from the outset, for those who are not going to go read all these statistics: his insight and analysis was really good, because what he was saying is that, usually, when we do research, it’s like, “Do you believe this? Do you believe that? Yes or no?” And he was saying that this research by, uh, Pew went a little deeper; not just, “Do you believe in God, do you not believe in God?”, but then a kind of a scale of how certain you were. And it really does, kind of, shake up this assumption that older people are solid and absolutely certain that God is real, and young people don’t believe in God. These statistics did not show that at all. What they showed was that, across the board, it is a reduction in certainty rather than a reduction in belief that can be seen across generations.

And I, like you, Adam, I kind of like that. To me, it pointed to mystery. It pointed to a new way of doing discipleship away from the cerebral Sunday school, kind of, learn and just spout out. To me, it seemed more about reflection and, like I said, humility, in what we believe. You can hold strong convictions and be able to say, “I might be wrong.” I mean, that’s scriptural, right? To say, “We understand a little bit, but one day I’ll understand fully, but that’s not today.”

Adam: Yeah. And what if some of the present impasses that we’re encountering across communities is owing to the fact that there were people who were too certain and too sure of themselves so that they became unmovable?

Mark: And on the other side of things: as we’ve been talking, faces, voices of parishioners of mine through the years have come. How many people have said, “Well, I probably have the least amount of faith of anybody here”, or “I’m not really qualified to say anything about the Bible or prayer or faith, because everyone else here seems so certain, and I’m not.” As if it is almost a point of shame or something that want to...instead of us saying, “A community or people who were kind of half in the dark (again, scriptural) and trying to find our way through this in God’s grace.” And I wish we could just excise that from faith communities, people who think, “Everybody else has got this, and I don’t.”

Beth: I like to understand the terms that people are using. So there were several things that I wanted to ask Ryan in this piece, which is: is it fair to say that conservatives and liberals can be discerned by the

decade in which they were born? There's an assumption made that the older people were conservative, the younger people were liberal. There's also, you can dive into those terms; like, what is he talking about? You can be politically liberal and theologically conservative, and vice versa. But the question that I was wondering about is: what does certainty mean? Is that being conflated with understanding? And if certainty is being conflated with understanding, then it would kind of go along with this understanding of: "I believe it, I experience it, I can't explain it."

Again, I think that's a Biblical way of being a witness, which is, "I can't tell you how this works. I can just tell you what I've seen, experienced, believe", etc. So that certainty understanding was a question that I have generally.

Adam: And I think you're picking out something that, for me, makes sense. When you think about the church from its inception, the way the world was viewed, the way we've made facts unitary and the supreme proof of some...that's just not the world of Scripture. That tension is one that, I think, begs for humility and, I think, a type of curiosity; again, the willingness to ask those questions, because I think when that curiosity is gone, our faith is in danger. When we think that we've landed on the plateau and we've got it all buttoned up, we're actually farther from God than we could ever imagine.

Mark: What makes it so hard — and this is an honest question — what makes it so hard to say, "We're not sure, but we're going in on this?"

Beth: Yeah. I mean, I think that's a question that resonates with Christians and pastors and ministry leaders alike, right?

Adam: Yeah. I'm thinking, Mark, that it's hard, because there's something of our identity that we want to stake to something concrete. We want to tether our identity to something that does not move. So when you start tinkering around with the things that we've anchored our identity to, then we want to stop asking questions. Because if I ask a question about this, about God, then now I've got to ask a question about who I am and who you are. So it becomes terrifying, to put it mildly, to start touching those things, instead of holding our identity as something that is being formed — that was formed and is being formed — and it's something that is fragile, but also something that is durable enough to endure the questions. We are not going to crumble, just like God does not crumble at the asking of the question.

Mark: See, that right there: I'm not sure, and — I don't know, I'm just going through the catalog of church folk I've worked with through the years, all of whom I deeply respect — but I'm not sure people think you can ask God questions. Somehow a lightning bolt's going to strike. I'm not really kidding. I think people are afraid. I'm not sure people trust God is durable enough to bring it on. The Psalms are full of that: "Bring it on."

Beth: Yeah. And I don't think anyone would admit to that out loud in the clarity that you just said, but that's exactly how the church has acted for a long time: that questioning anything was kind of a threat, and doubt was bad. And yet, the whole thing is based on grace and hope, and an act in human history that we do not understand how it worked. And I think this is great news for the church. Also, how on earth are you going to make inroads with the culture, if you refuse to allow people to ask questions? We're just going to keep swapping church members between churches without growing the kingdom in any way, shape, or form, if we're not willing to have questions asked.

Adam: Yeah. This is probably going to get me in trouble now, Mark. This is why, personally, I've always had an issue with Christian apologetics or defending. If God is truth, then truth doesn't need to be defended. It stands and we stalk after it. We chase after it. And again, for me, chasing means asking the question. And maybe that's because I wasn't born and formed in a Christian tradition. I came to faith as a young adult. So it wasn't a matter of, "Oh, you can't question God. There's something sinful about asking questions or directing questions toward God." It just doesn't make sense. It doesn't resonate with me.

How do I learn without inquiring? How do I, to your point, Beth, understand if I'm not allowed to ask the question? Perhaps faith is not in the landing, but in the launching. Faith is not in the saying, "I got it." But it's like the Apostle Paul said, "I count not myself to have apprehended." Something has gotten a hold of me that I'm stalking after, which means that every time I come to a point where I think I got it, I have to shed that and keep stretching forward. It's something that I'm pursuing, and not something that I possess.

Mark: Yeah. Um, what I think we all know is people come to faith and find a path toward God in many different ways. And I think some people do come through the life of the mind, and I want to respect that. Although I would align myself more with you, Adam, that, I think, to be blunt, a proof is going to work as long as there is no unspeakable, unreasonable tragedy that befalls a human life or the world. And at that point it's like, "What do you mean?" This logic train just derailed.

When I go out and do presentations or lead retreats, there's often something I use. And it's interesting, because Elizabeth and I are leading a retreat next week, and I just put it back in for the first time in over two years because it wasn't getting a lot of traction when I talked to church groups. It's four questions:

- Who is your next participant? Describe her outlook, her tribe, her hopes, her dreams, her needs.
- What is the story she told herself before she met you about the world, her situation, about her perceptions?
- How do you encounter her in a way that she trusts what she has to offer?
- And, what change are you trying to make in her life or story?

And honestly, reading Burge's piece, that sequence came back to me, because I think we in churches — and I'll indict myself at the front of the line — rush toward assuming we know what people need to be certain about this, instead of receiving their story and then saying, "Okay, let's start here, and God will start with us here, and we'll work our way through it."

Beth: Adam always jokes that I go back to Jesus every time and, Adam, I'm going to do it again. But Mark, everything you described is how Jesus encountered everyone he met. It was not the same across the board. He expected so much of some: the religious leaders. He met the woman at the well exactly where she was, and listened to her story. I don't understand why the church has made it so hard for itself in moving away and trying to do things so dogmatically and systematically instead of relationally. I just, I just don't.

The good news is, I'm reading this, and I have two young daughters who are in college. The good news is I'm reading this and seeing the statistics he comes up with, saying that 80% of Americans agree that God or a universal spirit exists. Talk about "the harvest is plenty", right?

These people are, are desperate to put a shape — not an understanding, not a, "I got it", but a name to what it is they know is right and real in the world.

We have an opportunity here as the church to do things in a new way. And writing young people off, saying, “Well, they’re not interested in church”, they may not be, but they are interested in faith, and they are interested in Jesus, and they are interested in a God who loves them. And that is our job, not institutions.

Adam: Yeah. I think that’s worth saying aloud and over and over again: the lack of interest in the church, I just don’t buy it. What I see is a lack of an interest in our expression of what church is. And maybe, just maybe, along with you, Beth, the church needs to model more what Jesus actually did, how he listened, met people where they were, and spoke to them in ways that they could understand. And sometimes that was tense, and sometimes people went away disappointed, but I don’t see Jesus lamenting that.

Beth: And he also never explained things. Like, that’s why his disciples, even in the farewell discourses in John, still had no idea what was going on. He never said, “Let me draw a diagram and let you know how this works, write a book on systematic theology so you’ve got it.”

Mark: Yeah. I get around the country a lot, and the last two Sundays we’ve been in two different worship services. In the first, the bulletin was stuffed with ads. I mean, they weren’t ads, but they were, you know, “join this group”, “do this”, “did you know this was going to happen?” I think I don’t need to fill that in. The second Sunday, we went to a worship service where the order of service was all we got with a simple insert about who to pray for this week. And this goes to the point of how churches are trying to respond to this uncertainty, questioning. I tell you, even though it’s all the way across the country, I would go to that second church every single Sunday, because it touched my own sense of wonder and mystery — I love that we use that word, Beth. The first one felt like I was in the middle of an infomercial, to be honest, with a little Gospel.

Adam: Wow. It’s not wasted on me, again, going back to that whole Bible and Scripture thing: when Paul was arguing or contesting for the faith before Agrippa, and after all this elaborate argumentation, all Agrippa says, “Ah, I’m almost persuaded.” It’s kind of like, “Nah, I’ll come back another day, and I’ll see if you can convince me a little more.” I just don’t think people change from arguments. People are transformed by experience. We can’t contrive that, but we can encounter it. Kind of like what you were talking about, Mark, a simple order of worship and a list of names of people to pray for. That’s different.

Mark: I’m going to quote a, uh, dead white male theologian, which I am not want to do, but this is a quote. When I was in college, this is something I read that actually changed my approach to faith, I think, in this spirit. It’s Paul Tillich and in, uh, *The New Being*, he wrote, “We only want to communicate to you an experience we have had: that here and there in the world, and now and then in ourselves, is a new creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus, who is called the Christ.”

Something about that quote released me from needing to be certain or conform. And I was astonished that this person who wrote all this theology was basically saying, “Yeah, here and there, I see it. The rest of the time I have to trust Christ.” That was actually a profound moment for me in my faith development.

Adam: Yeah. I think early in my theological training, you go through all of the deconstruction, all of that stuff that’s completely upsetting. You come with a notion of who God is, and then it’s all broken into bits, and you’re left to wonder with what you have. For me, it was a necessary step. That disillusion

allowed me to reorient myself toward truth in a way that — again, it sounds audacious — is actually faithful. I had to, rather than rest on my systematics or, you know, all of that, I had to start remembering personally my encounter with Christ, and how I could point to that time, and bear witness to a transformation that occurred, that I could not explain. And that's what I tell folks about. It's the "Come, see a man that told me everything that I ever did." It's a story.