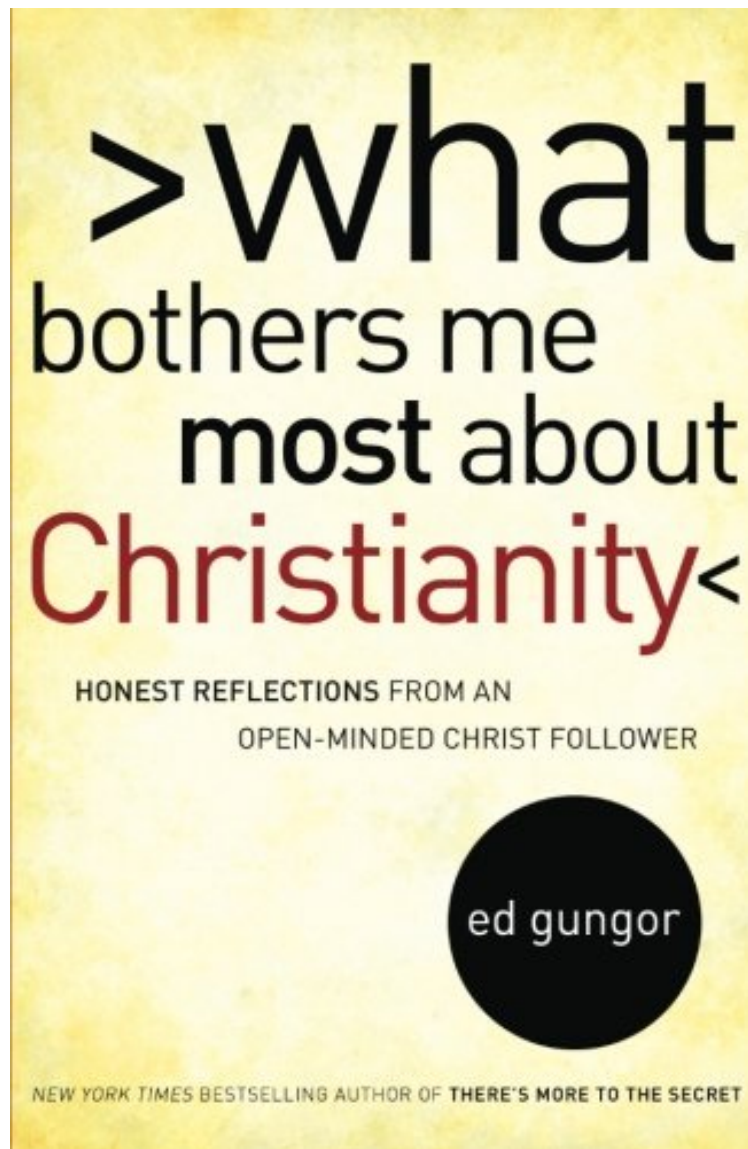


[Mobile book] What Bothers Me Most about Christianity: Honest Reflections from an Open-Minded Christ Follower

What Bothers Me Most about Christianity: Honest Reflections from an Open-Minded Christ Follower

Ed Gungor

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Ed Gungor : What Bothers Me Most about Christianity: Honest Reflections from an Open-Minded Christ Follower before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised What Bothers Me Most about Christianity: Honest Reflections from an Open-Minded Christ Follower:

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New York Times bestselling author Ed Gungor offers a provocative look at the questions that bother not only opponents of Christianity but dedicated believers as well. With candor and good will, Gungor joins the discussion generated by the multitude of atheistic books currently in the market and offers a thoughtful, reasonable response. In *What Bothers Me Most about Christianity*, Pastor Ed Gungor owns up to the valid criticism that affronts Christianity. With his trademark sense of humor and unabashed honesty, Gungor explores the ten most troublesome aspects of Christianity, addressing questions such as: Why does a loving God allow evil to exist in His world? If the Christian church is so good, then why have so many horrible acts been committed in its name? Why was God so harsh to His children in the Old Testament? Maintaining that having faith is not intellectual suicide and that mystery is an essential quality of the Christian belief, *What Bothers Me Most about Christianity* opens up the forum for amicable discussion between thinking people on both sides of the debate, from aggressive atheists to unswerving Christian believers. Gungor maintains that balancing faith and reason is indeed possible and that devoted Christ followers need not shy away from asking the tough questions. As he guides readers through these fundamental issues, they will find that their honest wrestling will actually bring them to a deeper, more mature understanding of faith.

"When I first heard the title, *What Bothers Me Most About Christianity*, I was a bit leery, because quite frankly, I am most grateful to be a Christian! But I was delighted to discover that Ed Gungor upholds Christianity while honestly addressing many of the misconceptions about the Christian faith. In a way that speaks to our post-modern culture, Ed Gungor takes these misconceptions, one by one, and systematically addresses them from a Christian perspective." -- Jerry Newcombe, D. Min. - TV Producer / Author "I love this book! It's a lot easier to give pat answers to questions people aren't asking than to wrestle honestly with the questions they are asking. Thank you, Ed, for wrestling with honest questions. I highly recommend it for people who wrestle and think!" -- Bob Roberts, Author, *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage a Flat World* About the Author Ed Gungor is the author of the New York Times bestselling book, *There Is More to the Secret*, as well as several other books. Lead pastor of The Peoples Church in Tulsa, Gungor also makes regular media appearances and speaks in churches, universities, and seminars nationwide. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. A HIDE-AND-SEEK GOD It bothers me that God is intentionally hiding I believe in God most of the time. But I have moments when I wonder if I'm wrong; times when I have a taste of doubt in my soul. Faith is a tricky business. Those of us who embrace it live our whole lives for someone we've never seen, and we believe in things we are convinced of but cannot prove (at least empirically). This could easily be resolved if God were visible. It bothers me that he isn't. I mean, come on, it would be such an easy matter for God to appear as God every once in a while, in ways that are undeniable. It would sure clear up some matters and show folks who's right (I love being right). I especially feel this way when believing in God gets me labeled as a "crazy" by those who claim that faith in God has as much value as belief in the Easter bunny or tooth fairy. I wish every person could have a peek at God, even if only once before the person dies. I'd even vote yes for people to see God while they are kids and then, when they come of age, to stop seeing him. Then they could wrestle with whether he is real or imaginary. That would be better than his being invisible. But invisible he is, and he's invisible on purpose. Judeo-Christian thought has a rich tradition concerning the "God who hides." God loves to hide; he loves to tuck himself so completely into the backdrop of life and creation that many completely miss his presence. Isaiah comes right out and says it: "Truly you are a God who hides himself." The Bible records that after Jesus' resurrection, he was with two of his disciples who knew him well, yet "they were kept from recognizing him." Jesus' own disciples had no clue they were walking along the road with the resurrected Christ. He was hiding. God also hid from the biblical patriarch Jacob, who exclaimed, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." God often told Israel, "I will...hide my face." The psalmists repeatedly lamented how God was "hiding" from them. But it gets worse than God's hiding his presence. When it comes to his message, he cloaks it in obscurity, making it fairly inaccessible. In one of Jesus' prayers he said "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned." What's up with that? Even Jesus' disciples didn't get what was going on: "The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about." When teaching the crowds, Jesus would say, "If you, even you, had only known...but now it is hidden from your eyes." He claimed, "This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." God often hid the meaning of his message from people. After Jesus departed and the apostles began to teach about faith, they alluded to this conspiracy of hiddenness. Paul wrote, "We speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden." The apostle repeatedly called the gospel a "mystery" that "was kept hidden in God" 12 only to be "revealed" at a special time to a special group of people. WHAT'S THE POINT? Any

thinking person has to ask, Why would God hide? If, as Paul said, God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth," why would God hide from people or make his message obscure? The whole notion seems counterintuitive. But as I've wrestled with this question, here are the best guesses I've encountered as to why God functions this way.

Allowing Faith to Be Faith Perhaps God hides because he has chosen to establish a relationship with humanity through the pathway of faith. In order for faith to be faith, God must remain invisible and unprovable to the senses. If God could be seen as plainly as the sun or experienced as unquestioningly as gravity, faith would not be required. God's existence would be an undisputed fact. The pathway of faith insists that relationship with God is a matter of human free will and not forced or involuntary. Faith can only exist in freedom, where we can choose to believe or not to believe. Because God uses faith as the only modality for connection with him, any relational connection between us has to be the result of choice or free will. As I wrote in the Introduction, if we aren't honest about the tensions in faith, problems emerge.

Christian theology sees God as almighty, all-knowing, and everywhere present; and yet, he respects the right of those he created to disregard him. He only wants authentic relationship with us, so he honors our right to ignore him. Authentic relationships require choice. Forced friendships or shotgun weddings do not constitute real relationships. But the choice to discount God would be impossible if God were visible. Why? Because God's presence is ubiquitous -- he is everywhere interacting with us, in everything from holding creation intact, to choosing when and where we would live, to causing all the good we know, to giving us "life and breath." Only invisibility affords us the choice to ignore God. Because he is invisible, we have the option, via faith, to leap past that invisibility into a relationship with him. Maybe this conspiracy of hiddenness is like the hide-and-seek game children play. God hides; those who want to find him, look for him. Scripture tells us well over a hundred times to "seek the Lord" or to "seek his face." Perhaps the call to "seek" God is a call to this hiding game. It seems that God has rigged the game so that the persistent, dedicated seeker always finds him. God promises to those who seek him, "I will be found by you." Jesus adds, "Seek and you will find." The notion that God is playing hide-and-seek with us is fairly scandalous, yet amazingly brilliant. Maybe this is why faith is partially fun. For me, it's both bizarre and fun to have a relationship with a Being I have "found" but can't see.

The Romance of Belief Another possible justification for why God hides is that faith involves more than the rational mind; it also involves the heart. Whenever you address matters of the heart, you must push past mere intellect. God's hiddenness requires that faith rest on more than intellectual interaction. Trying to connect with someone unseen messes with your reasoning faculties. To pull it off, you have to plunge deeper into your soul and engage the "what if?" and "maybe" pockets of curiosity within the human heart. Only when this curiosity ascends can a heartfelt "seek" dawn, leading to the heart-transforming "find." This rumors the enterprise of falling in love. Boy notices girl; girl notices boy. Eyes meet. Interest rises. There's often an unspoken hint of excitement. Why? Because there is hiddenness in the mix. The obscure dissimilarities between the sexes elicit curiosity in the person with an open heart, and curiosity is a great motivator for pursuing a relationship. Some won't go there -- it's too irrational, potentially painful and disappointing -- so they face life alone. To be sure, relationships have an intellectual component, but they are not just intellectual. They also transcend the rational mind. By the time a man and woman decide to enter into something as serious as a marriage vow, they have shot way beyond the function of intellect. Their wills, their emotions, their imaginations, the part of them that trusts -- all these aspects of who they are must weigh in. One could say that entering committed love involves the whole person. And when you give yourself totally to another person, risk emerges. You wonder: How will it change me? Will I be happy? Will I get hurt? Am I being foolish? Wagonloads of scary questions; lots of hiddenness. But the risk, the irrationality, the uncertainty, the hiddenness make love, love. Same goes for faith.

Something about the love between a man and a woman mirrors the love relationship we are to have with God. Paul claimed that the romantic relationship is "a profound mystery" that speaks of "Christ and the church." Somehow the clues of God's existence catch our eye, and we suspect he may be real and even reaching out to us. We feel a rush of excitement and anticipation. The idea may have some rationality in it, but it is also submerged in hiddenness, uncertainty, and irrationality. We choose either to keep seeking or to drop the issue. That choice is a critical one indeed.

IN GOLDILOCKS FASHION Though God is invisible, he leaves us clues that point to his existence. He drops hints of his activity all around us. But they are only hints. As you study the biblical record, you see that God loves to spill his life into the world through subtle, almost unperceivable ways. Unless you are actively looking for him, you will most probably miss him. As silly as it sounds, there is a Goldilocks way in which God sneaks around our world. Let me explain. In the children's story Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Mama, Papa, and Baby Bear came home one day only to discover that someone has been eating their porridge, sitting in their chairs, and lying on their beds. It wasn't until the end of the story that they found out it was Goldilocks. I think God, in Goldilocks fashion, gets involved with our lives before we notice him. As the Creator and Sustainer of all life, he metaphorically messes with our porridge, sits in our chairs, and lies on our beds. Though we can see and feel the results, we don't get to actually see him till the end of the story. The essence of faith is the human commitment to seek the clues until they lead us to the Hiding One. We may only find him metaphysically or spiritually, but find him we do indeed. James wrote, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." **NOT LEFT TO CHANCE** What's provocative about God's hiddenness is that God doesn't scatter his clues in the world and then leave it to chance as to whether people will notice them. He guarantees we will.

Scripture claims God has predisposed everyone to notice the clu...