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Fire Eater! Writer

The Passion of the Dave

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I recently considered establishing my own church in the spirit of new-age free evangelism. I thought I should call it the "Church of Dave". This epiphany may have been inspired by an near-catastrophic experience while repairing my deck.

With the whoosh of a strong Front Range gust of wind, I felt the ladder that supported me six feet above the concrete patio leave my feet in surreal slow motion. Instantly I reached out for anything that would bear my weight and what I found to my painful awakening was a partially attached railing with numerous half-screwed rusty wood screws. My forearm was now impaled, with a bent screw head saving my fall and slowing tearing at my flesh as I hung freely in the air. While suspended precariously by this one screw, I had a fleeting thought that it might be my time to meet my maker. I thought to myself, "This isn't how I go, is it?"

After I managed to free myself from the wood screw, and jump to safety, I looked up to the azure sky and peaceful clouds and I said, "Thank you, Lord!". Once again, I realized how such trivial events in our lives can alter our futures and bring us back to reality with our Creator. Thus I question, as I always have, my faith, or if you will, my religion. I write this today to bring to light man's quest for the understanding of the mysteries of life and its Creator. I may ramble on a bit here and there, but please bear with me as I take you on this vision quest of personal religious enlightenment.

“Should I not question my faith to grow spiritually in the eyes of God?”

As a genealogist, I find that the more I discover about my ancestry, the better I learn and understand who I am, why I am, and where I'm going. I descend from a wealth of religious and spiritually gifted men and women. Some were church leaders, including Quaker, Puritan, Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican ministers.
My 10th Great-Grandfather, Alexander Leighton, a Scottish physician turned full-time Puritan preacher, published a pamphlet titled, "Zion's Plea against Prelacy: An Appeal to Parliament" in 1630. This during the decidedly Anglo-Catholic reign of Charles I. The pamphlet attacked the bishops and caused outrage in the church. Alexander was arrested,

tried, and then sentenced by Archbishop Laud's High Commission Court to public whipping, having the letters "SS" branded on him (for "Sower of Sedition"), and having his ears cut off and nostrils slit. Leighton lived on for 14 years and finally died in 1644. Ironically, Leighton's son, Robert became an Archbishop himself.

I was raised in the American Baptist church. I attended church nearly every Sunday and involved myself in the activities of my church's youth group. As a Baptist, you must await or feel the calling of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring you forth and ask to be baptized in the Lord's name. Full emersion, completely reborn. This feeling of being called by the Holy Spirit never came to me as it did to near all those in my presence at one time or another. I felt that I was an outsider. Had my being called by the Holy Spirit been called off, or postponed for one or two recent sins or was it just my plain lack of faith? But how could that be? Should I not question my faith to grow spiritually in the eyes of God?

As I became an adult and found myself trying to make a living, I spent less time at church and more time seeking the truth of my existence, following various paths of self education and spiritual discovery. I went to various different churches, mostly churches of Judaeo-Christian beliefs. Some of these churches met in homes and in places like an old art deco movie theatre. While in these so-called houses of worship, I again yearned to be accepted or to feel God's hand on my shoulder. But this never happened. In fact, I have felt God's presence in the least likely of places and when I wasn't looking for a sign from heaven. I know in my heart that there is God, our Creator. I know this to be true, and I will share examples throughout this story

One fall day in 1964, my father, Herbert, had filled up the trash incinerator in our backyard. I watched him light fire to the trash and as he closed the incinerator's furnace door he said, "Stay away from the fire; it's hot and it will burn you". He went back to the garage and continued working on the car with his brother, my Uncle Jack.

Now here was a prime opportunity that no young boy with any curiosity about fire would pass up. So I grabbed a nearby twig and stuck it into the open edge of the incinerator where flames inside were visible. I pulled out that twig and the edge was bright red and aflame. I blew it out, quickly looking over my shoulder, making sure no one had seen me playing with fire. I then picked up the largest twig I could find that would fit into the incinerator's edge. I placed the twig into the fire and pulled it out a few seconds later. The twig was now an awesome looking torch. At least to a five year old boy. I then took this lit torch and held it to an old dried out leaf. Fire, by my own hand. I then blew out the fire, all the while holding my still-lit mini-torched twig. I was so proud that I could start a fire that I decided to move on to bigger and better things to burn. But what could I burn now? Well of course, I'll light the small bush on the other side of that chain-link fence. I lit that bush and as I tried to blow it out, the bush went from a small three-leaf fire to a full biblical burning-bush fire. Moses would have been in awe.

I dropped my torch and ran into the garage

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yelling, "Daddy, fire, fire, fire!". My dad crawled out from under the car as he and my Uncle Jack went to investigate the fire. Seeing the neighbors bush ablaze, they quickly grabbed a hose and put out the fire while I ran into the house looking for a good place to hide. Grandma Tennie (Tenneccee), my dad's mother, picked me up and asked me what was going on. So I told her exactly what happened. She scolded me and told me I should never play with fire. I was scared and started crying, knowing that the "wrath of dad" was sure to come. I heard my father cussing and saying my name and saw him walking towards the house. I was going to get spanked. There was no way out of this. My father walked in and saw Tennie holding me. He asked her, "Let me have him; he's going to get spanked good for this." Tennie refused, saying, "You're not spanking my grandson. If you do you will have to spank me too." My dad knew all to well that he would not be able to wrestle me out of his mother's hands, let alone spank his own mother. Tennie had raised six boys and would not hesitate to put any of them in their place, even as adults.

My father, still angry with my short stint as a pyromaniac, continued to threaten to punish me, while I stayed securely in grandma's arms. I then said, "Dad, remember when you said that you would never spank me if I told the truth?" He reluctantly replied "Yes". I then told him I started the fire and that I was sorry and would never ever do such a thing again. Tennie started to laugh as my father's face went from anger to a puzzled look that all parents have when they've been had by their own rules. Tennie said, "Well, Herb, you can't punish the boy for telling the truth, especially when you have given him your word." That day, I knew there was a God, a God who had given me a wonderful grandmother, an honest father, and a life-long learning experience. A God I thanked later that night during my bedtime prayer.

Now, as an adult I wanted to know is the God of the Catholic or Baptist or Anglican Church the same God who created this world we live in and the life we live? Is man-made organized religion the right path for all to follow? Or do we all need to find what works best for us in our personal relationship with God?

I believe most religions have a set of good morals driving their beliefs and most people who practice their religion are good people. Plus I'm far from being a religious scholar. I just follow my heart or gut feeling when it comes to my faith in God. But I'm not a huge fan of organized religion and its leaders. Why? Well, I believe that a vast majority of these religious organizations are nothing more than large businesses and corporations taking advantage of people seeking religious fellowship and a sense of belonging. I feel that the days of America's small traditional main street corner church are quickly fading away. But why?

I live near the world headquarters of Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs. a conservative religious organization founded by Dr. James Dobson, who built Focus on the

Family into a multi-million dollar religious empire. The headquarters, housed on prime commercial property with views of Pikes Peak and the Garden of the Gods, are a complex of several large brick office buildings. One of these landmark buildings is a large visitor's center that is incredibly posh inside with mahogany wood-paneled walls, Ethan Allen furniture, and state of the art electronic visual aids and learning devices. Focus had grown rapidly since its arrival from Pomona, California, in the early 1990s. Focus receives a vast amount of money from people who listen to Dobson's radio show, buy his and fellow Christian's books and tapes, and from those who believe that his message is inspired by God. But I ask, would God be happy with Dr. Dobson gaining his wealth through sharing the Gospel? Why is there not a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen on the sacred grounds of Focus on the Family? Could the money used to build Dobson's empire have gone to a more worthy cause? Is not Focus on the Family only breeding more hypocrites for Christianity?

Or how about New Life Church which is said to be the largest and fastest growing church in the Colorado Springs area. New Life is another fine example of the changing face of Christianity in America. The New Life church complex is rapidly growing and building both structures and membership. It is an amazing site. They're building a large Prayer Center, which makes no sense to me but I'm sure it does to New Life and its members. Why did they not use this vast wealth of member-donated money to build instead a drug rehab center or a safe house for battered women? Why waste so much money for a building you can pray in when you can pray nearly anywhere at anytime without a fancy building? To help beam up your prayer to God? I just don't understand the desire of people to help fund such towers of Babel.

I do know that many people are quite satisfied with their faith and their places and ways of worship. I also know myself well enough to know that I'm not satisfied with known biblical scholars or "on any Sunday" pastors who claim to have the answers to my spiritual needs. I know that there is a Creator, a God, and a supreme being who knows me and understands my desire to know life's mysteries. So I continue to question: Where is my faith, my purpose of being?