

THE SHIFT

PREVIEW

Please enjoy this complimentary preview of chapter one from The Shift.

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PREVIEW

To Sojourn Grace Collective.

Thank you for teaching me so much about love, community,
and wholeness, and for giving me the grace and space to
work through many of the ideas in this book.

It's an honor to be your pastor.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Surviving and Thriving after Moving from
Conservative to Progressive Christianity

THE
SHIFT

COLBY
MARTIN

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What Happened to My Faith?

Nothing. You've Still Got It, and It's Working Great

Snorring bounced off every conceivable surface, but that's not why I couldn't sleep.

The clock smirked 2:00 a.m. on the final night of our annual men's retreat, deep in the pine-dusted hills of eastern Oregon. Wide awake, I stared at the cracked ceiling of our log cabin while half a dozen other men—sleeping soundly, but not soundlessly—shook the room with their deep, slightly off-rhythm breathing. My friend Darryl sounded as though he had tried to swallow an Emily Dickinson novel before bed, but it had stuck in his throat, flapping against his windpipe like a two of spades taped to an overeager ten-year-old's bicycle rims. The vinyl mattress—ripped, forest green, barely two inches thick, probably intended for middle schoolers—currently attempting to offer me sleep stood no chance in the battle

against such vibrations. Even if I could have silenced the roar of my fellow bunkmates, I stood no chance against the deafening voices inside my own head.

Fifteen years later, I still can't recall what the keynote speaker said during the closing session of our retreat. Likely, he exhorted us to be more biblical manly men—some odd mixture of Braveheart and King David. Still, I'll never forget the flood of thoughts assaulting my consciousness as I lay there, sleeping bag pulled around my ears, desperately not sleeping. Whatever the speaker said somehow unlocked a flurry of seemingly unrelated (yet previously unconsidered) questions inside me.

Why do we think, I surprised myself by asking, that the mercy of God ceases the moment our earthly lives end? The Bible clearly states that God's love and God's mercy endure forever, yet the church teaches us that these divine attributes are only on tap for, what, seventy to eighty years or so on average? Why do we receive the reliability of God's mercy while oxygen flows through our lungs, but the minute our brainwaves stop, we assume the flow of God's mercy stops with it?

These thoughts haunted me for hours. I had no idea where they came from, nor what to do with them. I mean, never had I considered the possibility that God might show a person mercy *after* they die. My religious tradition always maintained that our eternal destiny gets locked in on *this* side of death's door. Yet, that night, I couldn't resolve the tension of why the power that raised Christ from the dead should suddenly become powerless at our own deaths. I couldn't understand why my religion limited God's mercy as applicable or efficacious only during a human's lifetime but impotent in the afterlife.

I eventually sunk into a restless slumber, meditating on the words from Lamentations 3 and committing to take them more seriously when I awoke: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;

your mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” As dawn broke and we packed up to drive home, God’s mercies weren’t the only thing new that morning.

I’m pretty sure I was too.

DON’T QUESTION THE STATUS QUO

That night, for the first time, I had detected that the clothes of conservative Christianity no longer fit. This discovery left me both exhilarated and terrified. I had worn those clothes my whole life. My alma mater sewed and stitched my cap and gown from those clothes. My uniform as a worship pastor came from the same fabrics. Yet I was entertaining ideas pregnant with the potential to strip me of my wardrobe and exile me from my faith community.

I grew up religiously attending a mixture of Baptist and evangelical churches. As a high school senior, a life-changing experience on the beaches of Southern California led me to abandon my dreams of becoming a graphic designer and instead enroll at a Christian liberal arts college, where I got my degree in pastoral ministry. I felt a strong call to be a pastor, so I dedicated myself to studying the Bible, learning the craft of preaching, and staying firmly planted in the soil of orthodox Christianity. Any attempt to accuse me of heresy was laughable, and my Christian communities loved and rewarded me for it. My strong and outspoken faith inspired others, and they admired my robust knowledge of the Bible. My passion for truth and skill in apologetics were unmatched.

So, why on earth did I entertain the notion that a loving God might opt to extend mercy to a person even *after* they had died? Such suggestions went against everything I had trained for.

After descending the Oregonian mountains, with my snore-filled sleepless night behind me, I met up with my wife and mom for lunch at a Subway in Salem. As we sat and unwrapped our

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turkey clubs, dodging their excessive oil and vinegar, I recounted my experience from the night before. I shared my musings around God's mercy, and why we suppose it runs out the moment our breathing ceases. It's not that I argued for universalism, as though I suddenly believed that everybody gets to go to heaven when they die regardless of their earthly life. I merely asked what (for me) seemed like interesting questions. Turns out, not everyone at the table found them as interesting. The look of terror in my mom's eyes meant one of two things: either the sandwich artist accidentally put pickles and olives in her footlong, or my fears about how my religious community would receive my questions were on point.

"Colby," she pleaded, setting down her lunch, "the Bible says that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And that no one gets to the Father except through *him!*" Her emphasis on the final pronoun was unmistakable. I nodded along, hearing the concern in her voice and sensing that if I pushed any further, things would go south fast. Her fear that I was toying with untouchables had risen to the surface, confirming my own fear that it wasn't safe to ask questions about deeply cherished beliefs.

If you've ever cast doubt upon traditionally held beliefs, I'm certain you know well what it felt like sitting in Subway that afternoon, lasering my focus on my Sun Chips and hoping the conversation would move on, regretting that I had shared my thoughts at all. You have probably felt that mix of enthusiasm and fear as you're lit up with some new and interesting idea, but also scared to death to talk to your friends and family about it.

When weathering the Shift, most of us discover just how much fear surrounds what ought to be the simple act of asking questions about our beliefs—to say nothing of the sheer terror at the prospect of changing them. Doubt raises all sorts of alarm in the majority of conservative Christian circles. I suggest this fear

emerges because we have fundamentally misunderstood the word, idea, and concept of faith.

WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FAITH?

Over the past several years, I've met hundreds of people who have undergone the Shift. When I hear about their journey of either willingly leaving or being forced out of their conservative faith communities, even though the particulars are unique, many of the underlying feelings and experiences show up with amazing regularity. The most common statements reveal concerns around the state of their faith. Frequently, I hear:

I think I've lost my faith.

What happened to my faith?

My faith just isn't what it used to be.

Such responses suggest a few things happening underneath. First, it's obvious that the person in question has recently undergone some sort of transformation. How they feel about their faith now is very different from how they've felt about it in the past. Something (or *many* things) has shifted.

Second, and slightly less obvious, is the presence of anxiety. This could be relatively small, a mild fever of sorts. Or it could range up to a full-blown nervous breakdown, a genuine faith-based freak-out. Regardless, the point is that worry and concern have tagged along during their journey of spiritual transformation.

Finally, statements like these reveal some assumptions around what it means to *have faith*—namely, that faith is a thing we possess and therefore it can be broken, lost, or altered in some way.

Imagine (hypothetically, of course) that I rush into the kitchen, beckoned by a voluminous shattering sound. I scan the room and see our boys, Nerf guns in hand, standing over a turquoise wreckage of ceramic shards. For me to ask “What happened to Mom’s

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elephant?” is a way of saying, “The state of this elephant figurine used to be intact, whole, and complete, but now it is in a new state of brokenness and disarray.” When Christians experience the Shift, they ask “What happened to my faith?” because they assumed faith was a possession, a thing to hold on to. Yet now it feels like a shattered tchotchke, blasted across kitchen tile, with this belief over by the sink, that belief landing in the dog’s food bowl, and twelve other previously held beliefs lost forever under the fridge and oven.

Next, consider the phrase “I think I’ve lost my faith.” Behind this sentiment is a belief that faith is a quality that can be possessed one moment and lost the next. Recently, I took my sons to a science museum where the main exhibit featured a history of the most innovative advances in video games. Curators transformed the space into massive gaming rooms with consoles and screens everywhere, all free to play and enjoy. One area was contained in a booth, somewhat isolating you from the rest of the crowd, where you could play a game designed to score your singing skills. I stepped in with my youngest son, determined to crush “Love Song” by Sara Bareilles. But the moment I held the mic and went to select the song, I became conscious of all the passersby. My karaoke courage withered; a fear that I’d look silly overwhelmed any excitement I had to see how many notes I could nail. In other words, I lost my nerve. Many people think faith functions just like nerve or confidence—it’s a thing we possess that influences us to make certain decisions, and therefore it’s also a thing we can lose, thereby changing who we are and what we do.

Even the relatively innocuous statement “My faith just isn’t what it used to be” treats faith as a commodity with varying degrees of quality, as though faith is like me and my relationship to jumping. Sure, in high school I could slam a basketball, no problem. But thanks to years, pounds, and entropic calf muscles, my hops aren’t

what they used to be. In a similar way, it's common for people to reflect on the state of their spiritual selves and feel like they *used* to have a robust, active faith that now feels stale.

To say it again, many people view *faith* primarily as a thing, quality, or commodity that we possess, rendering it susceptible to being altered, lost, or weakened.

That raises the question: If faith is understood as a thing we *have* (spoiler alert, I think it's more than that), then what makes up this thing? In other words, within this commonly held conception, what are the elements or components of faith, and what would lead to it feeling altered, lost, or weakened?

A SET OF BELIEFS

Ask the average religious person what faith means, and they'll probably respond with "Believing in something I cannot see or fully be certain of." Fair enough. Not a bad description. But if you take it another step and ask about *their* faith, now we're talking about something slightly different. The phrase "my faith" is often defined as "the set of my beliefs." In Christianity, this includes what you believe about God, the Bible, sin, Jesus, salvation, the church, the Trinity, and so on.

We tend to bundle all our beliefs into a singular box and wrap it up with a bow labeled "Faith." This collection of beliefs then becomes the thing we possess (a.k.a. our faith), rendering it vulnerable to being altered, lost, etc. I've witnessed over and over that a person will experience a shift in one belief, followed by another and then another, until some Tuesday night in November during a moment of introspection, they take stock of the current things they believe (or no longer believe), and it elicits statements like these: *I think I've lost my faith. What happened to my faith? My faith just isn't what it used to be.*

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My high school friend Carlos used to go to church and loved it, and he used to believe that the stories of the flood and Noah, and of the fish and Jonah, were both historical events. He has since reconsidered such stringent beliefs, leaving him feeling like his faith is less than what it used to be. My friend Jessica grew up in the church and used to believe God created the world in six literal days. But now science shows her that's impossible, so she feels like she's lost her faith. And Terry emailed me to share her struggles with believing that God still loves her, cares about her, or even exists, and expressed genuine dismay at what has happened to her faith.

Any of this sound familiar? You used to believe Jesus really did walk on water and magically fed thousands of people, but now you're not so sure. You used to believe the Bible was without error, a perfect book reliable for all of life's answers, but now you know otherwise. You used to believe that only people who accepted Jesus into their hearts would go to heaven when they die, but now you can't stomach such a thought. And when you add up all these shifts in beliefs over the past several years, you genuinely wonder "What happened to my faith?" *and* conclude that maybe, just maybe, you've lost it altogether.

These sinking feelings happen because we have allowed "my faith" to be shorthand for "the list of things I believe." As long as we understand faith to be a thing we possess, a thing made up of a set of beliefs, then we risk feeling like our faith is weakened or lost when our beliefs no longer fit inside the box we've made for them.

A THRIVING FAITH

To begin this process of surviving the move away from conservative Christianity, I want to expand our definition of faith. Many of the struggles and challenges that come up when we shift toward a more progressive expression of Christianity are aided (if not alleviated) by having a more robust view of faith. Yes, there remains a time and

place for using “faith” in a credal sense, to communicate that I do in fact possess a certain set of beliefs. We don’t need to eliminate that usage altogether. But faith is so much more than that. I hope to equip you with a more empowering, liberating, and beneficial approach to faith.

My wife, Kate, and I host a podcast¹ that engages in topics and questions related to progressive Christianity. One evening while recording, Kate attempted to summarize my position on the topic we were discussing. I felt she didn’t quite have it right, so I said that her explanation was a “straw man.” Now, I think our producer has since burned the recording of what transpired next, but needless to say, our conversation quickly went off the rails. As it turned out, I had fundamentally misunderstood what the term “straw man argument” meant. I thought it meant your interlocutor had an incorrect or incomplete version of your position, which would make it easier for them to cut it down. However, as I eventually discovered, inherent to the concept of a straw man is that the other person is *intentionally* (or even maliciously) misrepresenting you. While I only intended to say my wife didn’t articulate my position well, I used a term that accused her of nefarious motivations. Whether it’s the tactic of a straw man or the topic of faith, inadequate definitions can result in not just misunderstandings, but actual harm being done.

Based on my own experience and through countless interactions with Christians experiencing a shift, we do real harm to ourselves as a result of our incomplete and inadequate definition of faith. We end up feeling like we’re doing it wrong, or like we’re not enough and don’t measure up simply because we no longer believe the same things we once did. If we regard our faith as lost or

¹ Kate Christensen-Martin and Colby Martin, *The Kate and Colby Show*, www.thekateandcolbyshow.com.

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broken over our changing beliefs, then it's no surprise that people feel crushed by shame, fear, and inadequacy. And none of these are feelings God wants for you or your life.

We need to redefine how we think about faith. We need to pay attention to those moments when you're at a men's camp, painfully unable to sleep and staring at the spiderwebs in the corner, itchy because the clothes of conservative Christianity no longer fit.

The itchiness is normal. It's okay. It's good. But the accompanying feelings of fear and shame, while understandable, ultimately are unnecessary weights we can discard. Then, with a larger and fresher understanding of faith, and with a lightness in our step, we will get into some of the unique challenges we have faced (or will face) on our journey toward a more progressive expression of Christianity.

In order to survive the Shift, we must retrain our brains to see the modifying or shedding of beliefs not as doomsday signs that our faith is failing, but as beautiful indications that we are witnessing the power of a faith that is thriving.

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