

## An Excerpt from *Hope After Faith* Seeds of Doubt

My family, meanwhile, saw my deteriorating mental state as a potent symbol of the lost spiritual place that they believed I was in. After all, I was not evangelizing nor was I trying to build my own ministry. I wasn't even committing myself to another pastor's church. They insisted that I was sliding spiritually and, one day, my grandmother came over to our trailer to pray for me. Kneeling in the trailer, grandma prayed for God to deliver me from the evil spirits that were causing my anxiety disorder. I knew, even then, that a cure for my panic attacks was not going to arrive through prayer—this was a psychiatric disorder that affected my nervous system and it would be science, not faith, which would help me. Sitting on the couch in the trailer watching TV late one night, I saw an infomercial for a series of audiocassettes called "Attacking Anxiety and Depression" from the Midwest Center for Stress and Anxiety. Without a moment's hesitation, I reached for the phone, called the 800 number on the TV screen and bought the tapes. When the tapes arrived a few days later, I popped in the first of the 16 cassette self-help series—consisting entirely of testimonials from people afflicted with panic attacks—and realized that I wasn't going crazy, that this was indeed a legitimate psychiatric disorder. As I listened to the remainder of the series in our trailer, I began to grasp that my brain could tell me something so convincingly that I had almost no choice but to believe it. During anxiety attacks I actually believed that I was dying and the attacks were so severe that I would have rather known that I was going to have open heart surgery at 9 a.m. the next day than a panic attack. That is the power of nervous system: we can think things that aren't true and feel and see things that aren't real. With the "Attacking Anxiety and Depression" tapes, suddenly the subjective no longer held the power for me that it once had. Indeed, what I was learning about the power of the mind just might explain some of the experiences I had in the past—like speaking with God or hearing His voice. It was neurologically possible to hear an audible voice when there was no voice there. I began to entertain the possibility that there was an objective way of looking at my experiences and that this objective perspective might prove those experiences to be false. Up until that moment, seeing truly was believing—but what did it say about my beliefs if I had not seen or heard anything at all?

My reevaluations of what had been the most cherished moments in my life of faith—my conversations with God—were both energizing and enervating. I was feeling more in control of my life—particularly when it came to the panic attacks that

were plaguing me—yet I believed that I could have a deep, intimate relationship with God. When a minister named Charles Pierce, who had a reputation within the United Pentecostal movement for presiding over a healing ministry without peer, held a revival at the United Pentecostal Church in Leesville, I felt that I had to attend to revalidate what I had experienced in my revival days. Arriving at the United Pentecostal Church on a cool Sunday morning in the early spring of 1999, I took in its tall, cathedral ceilings, white molding, and color-coordinated pews and carpet with a mix of disdain and envy. Its clean, sparse design reminded me of a funeral home and I had long felt whenever I walked into expensively decorated sanctuaries that it was wasteful of the Lord's money. At the same time, I was envious—and desperately wanted to be a part of—the upper class of Pentecostalism and could be just as harsh in judgments when I visited a poor church with an old, staticky sound system or an unpaved parking lot.

But when Brother Pierce, a slender, square-shouldered, middle-aged minister who wore a clean white suit, began the service and ministered to the congregants individually, I was far from impressed. Brother Pierce addressed churchgoers with a very vague and general diagnosis of their problems—Sister, are you feeling ill? Brother, are you dissatisfied with your job?—and he ministered from the distance of the stage which only added an even more impersonal feel to the proceedings. About halfway through the service, however, Brother Pierce walked down the small set of stairs from the stage and into the aisles. To my horror, it seemed as though he was walking directly toward me. God is using Brother Pierce to chastise me, I thought nervously to myself, about just how doubtful I had become and how far I had moved from my Evangelizing days. To my great relief, Brother Pierce passed by my seat to focus on a slender man in his early sixties with scraggly facial hair who was seated in a pew behind me. The man had a disheveled look about him and he wore a tattered suit jacket that appeared to be about thirty years old with threads poking out from it. There were deep stress lines in his face—he was, as the saying goes, road hard and put away wet. When Brother Pierce stood three feet away from the man, he asked him to stand up. The man rose from the pews and stood silently before Brother Pierce. "Let's talk about your relationship with God," Brother Pierce said. "I know that you've been closer to God than you are now." The man nodded his head in agreement. "Yes, Brother Pierce," he murmured. "I know that you've bad habits, that you've gone to smoking," Brother Pierce continued, bringing another nod of the head from the man and another "yes." An intensely serious look came over Brother Pierce's face. "Yes, indeed, you have gone to smoking. And you are smoking... Pall Malls." Just then, the man's eyes became as big as saucers. He opened his well-worn suit jacket with his right

hand, rustled through an inside pocket and thrust out a pack of Pall Malls for Brother Pierce and the church to behold, bringing an ecstatic Ahhhhhh! which rose from the congregation and echoed throughout the sanctuary. In those first few seconds after the Pall Malls revelation, I felt that I should get on my knees right then and there and pray and perhaps even bow before God. But as the worshiper slid the Pall Malls back into his rumpled suit pocket, I grew suspicious of Brother Pierce's ministering even though a part of me was shouting, screaming, and berating the naysayer inside of me, "Move on!" Steadying my nerves, I realized that what had unsettled me about Brother Pierce was that his ministering seemed all too much like a parlor trick—this was far from the personal dialogue with God that I had been seeking when I attended the revival. Belief, I thought to myself then, had to be larger and greater in spirit than a magic trick.

My feelings about Brother Pierce, unfortunately, did not dissuade my family members from seeking out his healing ministry. Just a few days after the services at United Pentecostal Church in Leesville, Brother Pierce brought his revival to the First United Pentecostal Church—known simply as "First Church"—in DeRidder. My mother took my sister, Britney, to the revival in hopes that Brother Pierce would heal her of her Down's Syndrome. I remember thinking that the idea of Brother Pierce healing Britney was ridiculous because I did not see Britney as being ill—I saw her as genetically different. If Brother Pierce heals Britney, I remember thinking, it truly would be a miracle because God would have to heal her all the way down to the chromosomes. I didn't have any confidence that Britney's Down's Syndrome would simply disappear due to Brother Pierce's prayers and, worse, I worried that the services would make her feel afraid or like a lesser person. I couldn't bring myself to attend the revival with Britney and my mom. My skepticism about Brother Pierce was confirmed when my mom told me after services that Britney simply got in line and was prayed for. Brother Pierce offered no special prayer for—or individual attention to—Britney and, of course, she was not "healed" of her Down's Syndrome. But what was of no surprise to me was a huge disappointment for my mother. She had been reluctant to attend the revival at first but once she committed to going she had high hopes for how Brother Pierce might help Britney. My mother was all too aware of what made Britney but she still allowed herself hope. My grandmother, meanwhile, expressed a quiet disappointment about the revival. "It just wasn't God's will," she said and purposefully left it at that. Neither one of them attempted to explain why Brother Pierce's healing ministry had not worked wonders on Britney—it was simply a mistake to not be repeated or talked about.

The disappointment with Brother Pierce brought back the dull hum of doubt in the back of my mind.

Brother Pierce's revival had failed to rekindle the feelings of intimacy with God that I'd felt during my early Evangelist days. Now I felt completely disenfranchised from the relationship with God that I had held very dearly. I had laid down my life for my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Until then, even as I had growing doubts about religion and the Pentecostal tradition, those doubts had no ramifications for Jesus and me personally. Even the loss of confidence in the divine nature of the Bible had not affected my relationship with Jesus, which I had compartmentalized. No matter where I was in my spiritual life, Jesus was a constant companion. I continually sensed his presence; it was easy to close my eyes and visually imagine Jesus being there and listening to me, to see Jesus's hand of guidance in things that did or didn't work out or feel the presence of the Holy Ghost in the form of goosebumps which were like a breeze coming across me physically or internally, a confirmation of Jesus's tangible, permanent presence in my life. With the panic attacks and my subsequent understanding of the effects of the nervous system on my perception of reality, that special, personal relationship with Jesus was finally challenged. It was a step too far in my reassessment of my faith. I realized that I had drawn a circle around my relationship with Jesus. It was like crime scene tape, an area that no one could enter. As I grew older and more skeptical, I internally debated the authorship of the Bible, the fallacies of man-made religion, and questioned the supernaturalism of a healing ministry like Brother Pierce's, but until that moment my relationship with Jesus had been untouchable. I was truly lost and I remember thinking "This is what a lost person must feel like."

Former Louisiana pastor's courageous memoir chronicling his conversion to atheism. Atheism's leading lights have long been intellectuals raised in the secular and academic worlds: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens.

By contrast, Jerry DeWitt was born and bred into the church and was in fact a Pentecostal preacher before arriving at atheism through an extraordinary dialogue with faith that spanned more than a quarter of a century.

**Hope After Faith** is his account of that journey.

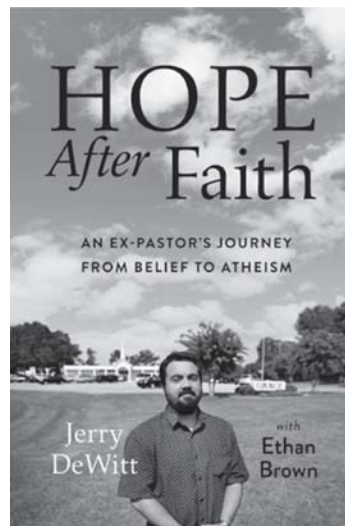
DeWitt was a pastor in the town of DeRidder, Louisiana, and was a fixture of the community. In private, however, he'd begun to question his faith.

Late one night in May 2011, a member of his flock called seeking prayer for her brother who had been in a serious accident. As DeWitt searched for the right words to console her, speech failed him, and he found that the faith which once had formed the cornerstone of his life had finally crumbled to dust.

When it became public knowledge that DeWitt was now an atheist, he found himself shunned by much of DeRidder's highly religious community, losing nearly everything he'd known.

DeWitt's struggle for identity and meaning mirrors the one currently facing millions of people around the world. With both agnosticism and atheism entering the mainstream—one in five Americans now claim no religious affiliation according to a recent study—the moment has arrived for a new atheist voice, one that is respectful of faith and religious traditions yet warmly embraces a life free of religion, finding not skepticism and cold doubt but rather profound meaning and hope.

Hope After Faith is the story of one man's evolution toward a committed and considered atheism, one driven by humanism, a profound moral dimension, and a happiness and self-confidence obtained through living free of fear.



[www.hopeafterfaith.com](http://www.hopeafterfaith.com)

## Dear Christians

### Pastor's Journey from Belief

Jerry DeWitt entered the ministry when he was 17, launching a 25-year career as a Pentecostal preacher . . . All these years later, DeWitt, 42, is still on the road, and now takes his message all over the United States. But the nature of that message, along with his audience, has changed dramatically.

~By Dan Merica, CNN

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