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Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today's episode we have a distinguished guest. Mary Jo Sharp. She is the Assistant professor of apologetics at Houston Baptist University, the director of Confident Christianity, and also the author of an excellent book *Why I Still Believe*, the former atheists reckoning with the bad reputation Christians give a good God. So Mary Jo welcome to the show today.

Mary Jo Sharp

Thank you so much for having me, Shea.

Shea Houdmann

So tell our listeners a little bit about your background and what led you to write on why I still believe.

Mary Jo Sharp

OK, so yeah, I didn't grow up Christian. I grew up generally without church or God in my life and but my family loved nature and the sciences and the arts. So I had a rich cultural upbringing which I actually believe inspired my philosophical and theological curiosity. I wouldn't have known growing up that I was technically an atheist, since I hadn't really encountered that word, but I did know that I lacked belief in God and like I said that that my family's love of the arts and the sciences and the outdoors, it really inspired me some questions about the meaning and value of life.

Mary Jo Sharp

Specifically, I would experience you know, like great beauty in the world or my father loved shows on outer space and so I would wonder at the vastness of the universe, and I had a high school music teacher who was a Christian and he was burdened to share his faith with me. So this was a person I greatly respected 'cause I actually have an undergrad in music education myself and my senior year of my high school, he gave me a Bible as a you know, present as a graduation gift and he said when you go off to college you can have hard questions. I hope you'll turn to this. And he he really hit me right when all of these questions about meaning and value were sort of starting to form in my mind. And so I did read that Bible and that that helped me to come to terms with there's probably a God, and in fact I started believing in God.

Mary Jo Sharp

But then I went off to college to see what you know, get more specific teaching on what the Bible is teaching and who Jesus was. So I actually went off to college and started attending churches for their first time, exploring faith rather than being a college student when often lost faith. And I eventually found a church where, through the invitation of a friend like I, I clearly understood the gospel presentation and a call for salvation. And I trusted in Jesus.

Mary Jo Sharp

Now fast forward several years many years, because why did I write the book? In part, it was because the expectation that I had coming into the Church of what I would find there. In the community of the church did not meet a sort of I would say it was a naive expectation that I had, that I thought, wow, I've found these great people. They're going to be the best examples of everything I'm reading in the Bible and they're going to have committed their lives to this endeavor of, you know, transforming themselves into Christlikeness, and, you know, I want it to get down to the basis of why I wrote the book. It's because of the hypocrisy that I so normatively encountered in people who profess the word of God is true. So it's not a dumb, you know this person messed up and they apologized. It's this unrepentant and lifestyle hypocrisy that wasn't demonstrably concerned with the transforming life in a recognizable way and so yeah, this this was a disorienting enough experience.

Mary Jo Sharp

That's, you know, that's a big umbrella statement of as to all the little things that had happened, which I explained some of them in my book. But that was a disorienting enough experience to cause me emotional doubt, because I've seen this very big disconnect between what the Bible is telling us. You know was commanded and what we were supposed to be versus what was constantly my experience in this Christian Church. And so that led to emotional doubt, which led to eventually to intellectual questioning.

Mary Jo Sharp

And so the book was born out of my experience in the church and out of my desire to bring the reader into my life rather than keep them at bay with just giving them arguments for the truth of Christianity. The book actually shows them how the arguments help bring me personally back around to faith in God and hopefully it will help somebody else in their own journey.

Shea Houdmann

For sure, so just briefly, I wanted you to spoil everything that's in your book, but what are some of the reasons that will cause you to continue to believe, and what some of the arguments that you found so people who've had a similar life or church experiences you that have been really helpful to them as well.

Mary Jo Sharp

Yeah, so I'll, I'll focus a lot on that first part because I think the the arguments that sort of influence me and then the ones that help other people as well are they're sort of similar that, as I began to investigate the truth of Christianity, I started coming across many arguments I'd never heard of from the church and I. I was actually really surprised that they were arguments for the Christian faith, so over the course of time I began to see that these arguments built a really solid case of foundation, and for Christianity they built this positive case that I didn't know was there and I'm going to mention some of them, but one of the important things I saw was that the litmus test for the truth of Christianity couldn't be the behaviors of the Christians, so I had to look at like the propositional truth of Christianity. And that's these arguments sort of brought me back around to saying, wow, these do look like they're true.

Mary Jo Sharp

So some of the arguments that I encountered early on were the argument from the moral from moral law that in order to be sort of logically consistent in talking about good and evil, I need to know where

I'm getting those concepts from. And for me, as I explore the atheist explanation that at the base of the universe there's no such thing as good and evil, just pitiless indifference. You know, chants sort of a chaos view. It didn't match with my human experience or with what I've learned about the ordered nature of the universe, and it didn't logically make sense.

Mary Jo Sharp

So I conversely I sort of saw that we're all making moral judgments every day on what is good, what is evil. We'll talk about right and wrong, just and unjust. So we're not living as though morality is subjective or relative to any given individual or group of people in any time frame. So I constantly with thinking well, what are we using as a basis or ground for this idea and what made sense to me was that morality comes from a person who has morality, something with a will, and intentionality not from blind pitiless forces. But it comes from a being like God who has personhood, and therefore intentionality, will, and morality, and so that was one of them. I want to explain the other ones as much. But that was one the evidence of the resurrection was another. Because I wasn't sure when I was questioning my faith why I thought Jesus rose from the dead, you know? Do I have a testimony that's just beyond well I know in my heart and it was there any facts in human history.

Mary Jo Sharp

And then I found Gary Habermas Minimal Facts and and his other facts. So he has a book, I think it's called the the Risen Jesus in Future Hope and it has, it lists a whole bunch of facts that people agree from our history, you know like that Jesus died, so he's a real person in human history that he wrote that his tomb was empty. These these are agreed upon facts. There were evidences around the resurrection that caused me to say whoa. What best explains this?

Mary Jo Sharp

And ultimately, like I said, I'm not gonna go into all the details, but ultimately I said, oh I'm, I'm pretty sure that I think something happened there like that there's a man who rose from the dead and his name is Jesus, so. Those sorts of argument in combination with other arguments I was encountering, such as the Kalam cosmological argument, the fine tuning argument. Arguments from like how do I know to trust my own rationality like how do I know that I have you know, epistemic access to external reality? How do I so? How do I know that what when I do a lab experiment and I throw all these factors in there that my brain is accurately reporting what I'm seeing?

Mary Jo Sharp

You know there's there's so many things that were going on that brought me to this belief that wow. I couldn't get around this basis of God for what it was that I believed. And so I kept hitting a roadblock to disbelief. And that's some of the reasons that for why and those who like. I give you all the rational reasons right and give any like sort of emotional, experiential but those are the sort of rational reasons with propositional truths that brought me back in this scene, wow, this probably got it.

Shea Houdmann

I I can tell just from talking to you that your your brain is wired very similar to me that apologetics really really connects with me. I love studying it. I love talking about. I love writing about it like it's love apologetics in general. But arguments can only take us so far. So what are the? What is the importance

of also having a relationship with those who are we are trying to reach not just trying to convince them that intellectually, but also allowing them to see that we love them, that we care for them and how do you in a sense balance those two in an attempt to reach someone?

Mary Jo Sharp

Yeah, I think it's really important because I've tried it like my whole ministry has tried to been, been based on this idea of love and logic and I always put love first. Love in logic. Because it is a very important balance as as explained by the apostle Paul in First Corinthians 13. About you know if you have all knowledge and if you can, you have faith that can move mountains. If you give your body up to be like burned you know it's but you have not love and then you're nothing, and to me that's sort of like how are we engaging people? Are we just putting out propositional truths and say, hey, this is true? Are we actually saying because this is true, there is a way that I'm commanded and responsible to treat you?

Mary Jo Sharp

And so these aren't just propositional truths that I hold in my mind, so yeah, that's that's something I'm interested in and I agree with. So there's a God. But these truths mean that there's a way that I'm supposed to care for you as a person. These truths mean that you know you have ultimate value to God, and so I have to. I have to develop that in my own life as I share arguments. As I you know discuss with people what it is that I believe. So there's you know arguments can be unconvincing to people for various reasons because of they don't hold up the same presuppositions you do, they have a different background or culture.

Mary Jo Sharp

So there there has to be that element of relationship they. Have to trust you they have to know that you actually care about them, and you want what's best for them. And you're not just turning them into some some kind of cliched Jesus project where your care for them only goes so far as your debate with them.

Shea Houdmann

Now as I was sharing with different different people, who do you have on the podcast this week, Shea and I mentioned you and the title of your book, that Why I Still Believe. But what really caught most people attention was a former atheists reckoning with the bad reputation Christians give a good God. So in your personal experience. When you started attending church and discovered that all the hypocrisy, all the people who are not practicing what they preach, so to speak. How did you overcome that and why in your experience, why is it that way? Why are there so many people who are willing to claim the name of Christ but then not and submit themselves to Christ?

Mary Jo Sharp

Yeah, this is such a big question, right? This is like when you read Paul's writings in the New Testament. This is sort of his question too. How are you claiming you know Christ, and then you're not submitting yourself to becoming Christlike. And you know, there's a lot of different reasons. I think that's going on, so I'm not going to touch on all of them. I'm sure listeners, can you know, they'll think of others and some of the things is that we we tend in the church to treat the truth of Christianity as just propositional truths that you either accept or you don't, and that seems to convey that if you have right belief,

orthodoxy. Then in a sense you're just you're good to go. But that's not how you see Paul addressing these things, and we we mentioned one instance when I was talking about First Corinthians 13 that he says, you know all of these things about having all knowledge. But if you're not transferring that over into love, your nothing. Is what he says, so I think there's their needs in the church.

Mary Jo Sharp

What I was seeing is a lack of attention to not just having Orthodoxy and perhaps not just having orthopraxy, so doing the right things, but actually having an orthopathy, having the right attitude towards truth, towards other people, towards how God sees people. And I saw, I think what I encountered in the church was a lot of Christians who had Orthodoxy, void of orthopraxy and or void of orthopathy so and that what that looks like is self righteousness and pride and self centeredness and and not really looking out for other people. So you know, there's sort of like what I think, how? Why is this in? The church how does it you know what is it doing in the church? Well, it's kind of or how did it get there, sorry. How did this get into the church?

Mary Jo Sharp

Well, I think there's sort of a lack of a discipleship that is intentional to attend to each of these areas, and many Christians don't know what they believe or why they believe it. And I think that they have a sort of a dismissive attitude towards the life of the mind. And when I encountered that, I saw it as hypocrisy because I saw. Proverbs you know 18 was teaching me to, you know that I was supposed to listen to people and truly try to understand them, and that I was supposed to, you know, the first one who comes along his case seems right, but until another comes along and questions him, so I keep seeing these instances in the Bible of really having a good, solid life of the mind and listening and caring for people.

Mary Jo Sharp

So there's this rich intellectual tradition in the church that I wasn't seeing, and I think we need to be very careful about paying attention to that, but also to marry that with the orthopathy, you know, making sure people don't just have knowledge, but that the it's it is changing who they are. It's transforming them into Christlikeness and being intentionalist churches to teach that and to help people practice that and that. That's sort of one of the reasons why I think it's in the church. Like why is there this divorce? Why am I seeing so much hypocrisy. I think it could allow truth proclamation. Without sort of education in these other areas.

Shea Houdmann

Why is Christianity still worth it? Because you are not the first person to discover hypocrisy in the church. In your you won't be the last. So if someone who's actually struggling with this issue, they're encountering hypocrisy in the church, why should they consider continue pursuing Christ?

Mary Jo Sharp

Yeah, it's a really good question and there's a, there's an author that framed it much better than me. I use him in my book. His name is Daniel Taylor and he talks about, you know the seeing the potential. He says the supernatural potential Christians laboring to establish the Kingdom of God together. It's so great that that that potential is so great that when you experience the reality of the typical church. He

says it's both depressing and comic by comparison. So he's saying that to say this is why the church is like as an institution is so easily ridiculed. Because it's so far off at times from what you're reading in the scriptures, but here's what I want to point out, and here's where this like what is the church still worth it. He says what is amazing, however, is not that the church suffers from every kind of failing common to human beings, but that simultaneously it's still the primary instrument of God's work on earth. So one of the reasons I continue to be a part of church and church community is that I believe like Taylor here, you know God was willing to die for us, so I can't get give up on the community that he wouldn't give up on.

Mary Jo Sharp

And further, I understand God as a Trinity, and so the model for community is based in this essential Christian doctrine, so I know I need community 'cause God's the model. So church is not I, I haven't given up on the church for various reasons. I know any community, I know I need accountability and the church provides that as well. And I know I need to be loved and the church, even though you're going to get hurt, love is one of those things that's worth it to be loved and to love, and to be loved and to love.

Mary Jo Sharp

So that's one reason I'm God is not worth giving up on because he's the great mystery at the base of our universe that gave us life, truth and love among other things and so I feel like to give up on God, now it's it's not appropriate because I've barely scratched the surface of my relationship with him. I've come to realize that there's just so much more I don't actually know about him. There's so much left to be explored. And then Christianity, why don't I give up on Christianity? 'cause it's the it's the philosophical framework that makes the most sense of the world that I experience in every way.

Mary Jo Sharp

So rationally, emotionally, empirically, it's it's the one that makes sense of the human experience to me and makes sense of things like why we say humans have ultimate value, dignity, purpose and where we base a lot of our beliefs in human rights and those sorts of ideas so. I I don't think that we should give up on any of those things and I haven't because of these kinds of reasons.

Shea Houdmann

I think the most powerful reminder leads to me is that God is more offended by hypocrisy in the church than we ever could be. I mean he hates sin, he's too holy to look upon sin without wanting to judge it and so forth. And yet God has not given up on the church. The church is still, as you said, God's primary plan for this current era, it's it's Christ's bride. We are so valuable to him if he doesn't give up on it, how could we? And then also the the concept of trying to get things from your head to your heart and for me being someone who I'm very deliberative and analytical, I tend to overthink things. It's really easy for me to be satisfied with knowing something in my head without allowing it to make the journey to impact my heart in terms of how I live, how I treat others etc. So I I get that in but your book was a powerful reminder to me to not be satisfied with knowing things intellectually, but also allowing them to transform that how I live and especially how I treat others and they.

Shea Houdmann

In conclusion, my last question for you. One thing I really appreciate about your book is that you encourage people to be honest with their struggles in talking to other people, admit that you know I really, really struggled with this. Where there is hypocrisy or so forth and you encourage people to share their stories of what they've been through and why, they still believe them. Why do you think that's so important?

Mary Jo Sharp

Yeah, I think for sharing those stories it's so important because I'll speak out of my own experience. But then I've heard this over and over is that you feel very alone. When when you have the doubts and the skeptic skeptical thought about this group that you've identified with and you feel left out, you feel sort of isolated and lonely when you're the one that's asking these hard questions. And you can tend to think that nobody else has them, and so it's important to hear from other people that they have struggled through the same questions. And it's important to be able to explore well where have they come to and what are they you know how are they framing it?

Mary Jo Sharp

Because you know, I've said things in my way in the way that makes sense to me, and in the way that things impact me, and I've shared with people, well, these arguments were really important for my journey, but that's not everybody. You know. Some people will relate to it. Some people say, yeah not so much so, the more stories that we have from other people, the more different perspectives we have because they have different backgrounds and different things impact them.

Mary Jo Sharp

So I think that's important because it helps people who feel isolated in their journey understand that they aren't alone in this, that there are a lot of people that struggle and that that's common, your doubt is common, so yeah, that's that's the I think that's one of the most important parts of sharing your journey is to help those people who feel sort of isolated say no, this is more common and you even find people throughout the Bible that you know doubted even when they had a supernatural experience with like an Angel, they still had disbelief so in some way you know they doubted what was going on, so I think that's one of the main reasons why I would say you need to share is that it's for that community aspect. It's for that getting rid of that feeling of isolation. It's for helping people understand this process of you know, knowing what they believe and why they believe it, and it's from different points of views so that they can relate maybe not to mine but to somebody elses.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent, I love that explanation and just encouraging people to to be real to admit their struggles so that they're not the only one like verse no temptations sees you except what is common to man. I think that applies to a lot of things. No mental struggle, no emotional struggle that you're dealing with. You're not the first person in human history, or especially not in Christendom to deal with these things and being open and honest as of people, to know that we can compare these burdens together, we can encourage one another. But to do that requires some openness, and so I really appreciated how you express that in your book.

Shea Houdmann

So and again, we'll include links to where you can learn more about Mary Jo Sharp and the ministry that God's given to her and her book on Why I Still Believe. Where you can acquire that book. Mary Jo just briefly, who's this book for? If someone like listening to this, who is the person you think would be most benefited by reading and Why I Still Believe?

Mary Jo Sharp

Oh yeah, I wrote this book really for people, mainly my my target was the person who thinks that they are they believe they are Christian and that they were really that they're really having struggles with the things that they see in the Christian faith in the Christian faith community. And so my my target was specifically for people of the faith community who are struggling with the culture of Christianity and specifically the the culture and their the church culture. So that's who I would say. You know, that's my target.

Mary Jo Sharp

I have had other people, some non believers and some people who are considering Christianity that found the book very helpful as well because I'm specifically not trying to tell you what to think, but to invite you into these sort of educational journey. So that's who I would say it's for.

Shea Houdmann

Awesome well again. Mary Jo, thank you for being on the show today and again they'll will include links where you can learn more about her and Confident Christianity excellent resources. So Mary Jo, thank you again.

Mary Jo Sharp

Thank you for having me on Shea

Shea Houdmann

It's been the Got Questions podcast. Got Questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.