

Please explain when exactly you were and were not a Christian

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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A pet topic of mine is the tendency of some Christians to fixate on belief and its boundaries. You can't just state why you think belief in x, y, and z is important to Christian faith and life; you have to claim that those who believe x and y but not so much z are not real Christians. You can't just disagree with someone with a different view from yours; you have to stage an inquisition.

It frustrates me to see this all-belief-all-the-time orientation used to frame things as us real Christians vs. them fake ones. When people take a similar approach in drawing *themselves* outside the circle, it just makes me sad.

Tim Lambesis, frontman for the metalcore band As I Lay Dying, is in prison for the (unsuccessful) arranged murder of his ex-wife. In the past week, he [made headlines again](#)—for a pre-sentencing interview in which he claims that he and his bandmates, who have a large following in the evangelical music world, essentially faked their Christian faith to sell records. (Leave aside the suggestion that the two stories are equally newsworthy.) It's not that Lambesis was an impostor Christian from the start. He claims he gradually found some atheist arguments persuasive, and he began to lose his faith.

Lambesis [doesn't blame his crime](#) directly on either his faith or his loss of the same. But [this hasn't kept others from making one connection or the other](#). And the faith plot thickens: [according to the band](#), Lambesis was an atheist when he ordered the hit on his ex-wife but has since grown skeptical of his skepticism—so stay tuned because he might be returning to the fold.

All this talk of precise timelines of who's a Christian and who isn't! ("I actually wasn't the first guy in As I Lay Dying to stop being a Christian," Lambesis says in his interview. "In fact, I think I was the third.") This stuff only makes sense in a religious culture that places a great premium on personal intellectual belief—and thus devalues every other part of the life of faith. *Do you personally believe Jesus is Lord? How about now?* There's little space for an appreciation that waxing and waning in intellectual belief pretty much comes with the territory.

Now, Lambesis self-applied the word "atheist," and I'm not trying to say he was wrong. Nor am I in favor of bands or anyone else putting on a pious front just to move merchandise. Still, it bothers me that so many stories out of the popular evangelical world betray this assumption that a person's religious identity is defined almost entirely by what they feel convinced of at a given time—not by longer-term commitments, or communities of practice, or the promises of God. It can be a pretty shaky foundation.

I'm not suspicious of sustained personal conviction; I admire it and aspire to it. But as someone who doubts sometimes, I'm glad such conviction is not the only basis of my identity in Christ. If it was, I'd be doing an awful lot of converting to and from Christianity.