

## CHAPTER 1



# FROM SKEPTIC TO BELIEVER

I have been fascinated with Christian apologetics—that is, the defense of the Christian faith—and theology since before I became a believer several decades ago. I have studied these subjects, off and on, with a fair amount of intensity, and I hope my studies have prepared me for this task.

As corny as this might sound, I believe the circumstances leading to my writing this book may have been providential. A few months ago I was having dinner with two longtime friends and one of them began talking about Christianity, as he had done on numerous occasions before. Both guys are nonbelievers, and the one who invariably brings up religion seems to want to discuss it, perhaps to test the sincerity of his own beliefs by challenging mine. I don't remember our discussion word for word, but I clearly recall that at one point he announced that he couldn't understand how any person who uses his reasoning powers could possibly believe in Christianity. He claims, lightheartedly I think, to be a deist—



Sunday. Our entire extended family was very involved with the church, and I will always have the fondest memories of those days. Going out to eat after church was a family ritual I will always especially cherish. I trusted my parents, and I had no reason to distrust Christianity or the Bible, but the truth is that, like many kids, I probably wasn't engaged enough at a young age to give them the attention they deserved. I was more interested in figuring out ways to sneak out of church with my mischievous friends.

We learned about the Bible in Sunday school, and I went through the confirmation process. Whether or not I actually believed in the ideas, I certainly didn't embrace them actively, and as the years passed I slowly began to have doubts. This was no fault of my upbringing, or of the fine church we attended, but probably stemmed from my lack of seriousness at the time and my other interests. I either didn't sufficiently absorb the lessons I'd learned from the Bible or they gradually diminished in my memory from disuse. I'm sure this sounds familiar to many people, especially of that era.

By the time I was in college, I don't think I was a believer, but I often wondered about philosophical questions, including Who God was and what He was like. Like many, I thought I could bootstrap my way to an understanding of spiritual truths through my reasoning powers alone, largely unaware of the actual content of God's special revelation in the Bible.

I was unconvinced that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Though I always believed in a creator god, I had great difficulty believing in the God of the Bible—as little as I knew about Him, as it turns out. I couldn't accept that an all-powerful God, if He were also all-loving, would permit such evil, pain, and suffering as we see in the world when it is in His power to prevent it. The concept of an eternal hell was also difficult for me to square with the notion of an omnibenevolent creator.

Additionally, I couldn't comprehend why God would establish a system of salvation whereby one could attain eternal life simply by believing in Him, or more specifically, in Jesus Christ. I wondered how He could judge us on the basis of what we believe, which we can't control, rather than on our behavior, which we can. Then again, at the time I didn't grasp that the biblical concept of faith involved more than mere

intellectual belief, but I'll get to that later. So without even investigating the Bible as a young adult, I had serious doubts about Christianity.

Like my old friend, I flirted with deism for a time when I was initially exposed to it in an American literature course in college. Deism was popular during the Enlightenment, and a few high-profile American Founders such as Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were thought to be deists. In the course we read a fascinating letter from Ben Franklin to his friend Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale College, in which Franklin expressed some doubts about the divinity of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> But in retrospect, I doubt that Franklin was a deist, because in the letter he clearly acknowledged his belief in a superintending god. Furthermore, four years earlier he had called the delegates to the Constitutional Convention to prayer during a deadlock<sup>2</sup>—and why would he have prayed if he thought God did not intervene in human affairs? Nonetheless, it was mildly reassuring to me as a skeptic that someone as brilliant as Franklin had doubts about Christianity.

Deism sounded right to me because it seemed to solve the dilemma of evil. It allows one to believe in an all-powerful creator God Who is not responsible for the evil and pain in the world, since He is not active in it. What a relief. Finally, I could believe what I'd always known in my gut to be true: that God exists, but that He is a good God, not the God of the Bible Who permits, or possibly even causes, suffering.

On closer inspection, however, we might discover that deism doesn't resolve the problem of evil at all. If some regard the God of the Bible as morally unacceptable because He actively intervenes in His creation yet permits or causes human suffering, how much more repugnant is the god of the deists, who for no apparent purpose at all, cynically created this suffering-infested world and then completely abandoned it? Does this mythical god even have a plan of redemption for us? If so, why doesn't he tell us about it through revelation like the "mean" God of the Bible? How does he exact justice, or is there any such concept in this belief system? How does he account for evil? How does he draw his creatures closer to him—assuming he cares in the slightest bit? Where is he, anyway?

My purpose isn't to ridicule skeptics—as I said, I used to be one. But at some point I realized it was foolish and arrogant of me to pretend to

form final conclusions about the Bible and Jesus Christ when I hadn't begun to seriously study Scripture or Christian doctrine. It was reckless of me to make a potentially life-determining decision on nothing more than my naked ruminations. So I resolved to examine the evidence.

As it turned out, the more I studied it the more I came to believe that Christianity is true. It is important for doubters to understand that many of us believers came to the point of faith by first studying the evidence and using—not abandoning—our reasoning powers to analyze it. I discovered that to believe in Jesus Christ does not require us to discard our intellect. Reason is perfectly compatible with Christian doctrine—though admittedly, saving faith in Christ requires more than sterile analysis and intellectual assent to the basic propositions of the Christian faith.

Yes, we must believe that Christ is the Son of God, that He took on human form, lived a sinless life, and died a sacrificial death for our sins (2 Cor. 5:21). We must acknowledge our own sinful state and repent (Luke 13:3), turn to Christ, and trust Him for the forgiveness of our sins and for our eternal salvation, based solely on His grace and nothing we have merited. But the Christian faith *requires* more than the intellect because it *involves* more than the intellect. It involves the will: a conscious decision to place our trust (faith) in Christ for eternal salvation as if our life depended on Him—because it does. But it's a little difficult to take that final step of faith when you have serious doubts about Christianity and the Bible.

I want to tell you a little bit about my own spiritual journey from this point forward, not because it's anything to be proud of, or even that remarkable, but because it might be encouraging or helpful to some who are open to believing but are plagued with doubts similar to those I experienced.

## INVISIBLE SEEDS



I was constantly seeking the truth, but usually through my own feeble efforts and presumptuous ponderings, and without studying the Bible itself or examining Christian doctrine more carefully. One Christmas

not many years after I'd graduated from law school, my close friend Peter Kinder (who is now lieutenant governor of Missouri) invited me to his parents' home to visit with a few of his law school classmates who were in town.

Somehow the subject of Christianity came up, and Peter's friend Steve Springer began to talk to me about it. I shared with Steve certain doubts I had about the God of the Bible and told him I just didn't buy into Christianity. I will never forget a couple of things about this exchange. Steve did not fit my perception at the time of the stereotypical young Christian—a judgmental holy roller who accepted Christianity uncritically. He exhibited an extraordinary measure of grace. He not only didn't take offense at my skepticism, but he patiently retrieved his Bible from his bedroom and began to walk me through a few fascinating verses. This might have been the first time outside of Sunday school or church that someone went directly to the source and shared it with me.

Undaunted and unoffended by my challenge, he gave a model Christian response. Despite my skepticism, I was not close-minded and was genuinely interested in learning. I knew, after all, that I hadn't really given the Bible itself a hearing, much less a fair one. To my surprise—and this is embarrassing to admit—Steve showed me how verses of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, were tied to others in content and theme with remarkable frequency. Amazingly, I had never looked at a reference Bible before, and I was blown away. My ignorance was on display, but Steve wasn't remotely judgmental—to help me learn more, he even gave me that Bible.

I was genuinely intrigued to discover that the Bible was not simply a mishmash of stories, allegories, alleged historical events, and moral lessons. There was obviously a pattern here, and for the first time in my life the Bible appeared to me to be thematically integrated. The scales on my eyes started peeling away.

Though Steve didn't realize it at the time, he had planted a very important spiritual seed. But sometimes it takes the planting of many such seeds before the Christian root springs up in one's life. As often as not, the planter won't even be aware he planted the seed, much less that it would later grow and bloom. So believers should not be discouraged by an apparent lack of response to their witnessing, as it won't always

be clear to them or to the person to whom they are witnessing that they made an impact. We must do what we can and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit.

While I was intrigued by Steve's demonstration that Scripture was connected, I was still far from becoming a believer. Yet the planting of that seed was pivotal in my ultimate acceptance of Christ, which I would only realize many years later. The happy ending to this story is that a few years ago Steve was again in town visiting his old friend Peter and they both came by my house to say hello. I had never told Steve about the impact he had on me spiritually, and when we were all seated at the kitchen table I asked them to wait a minute while I went to my library to retrieve the very Bible he'd given me years ago. I brought it back and handed it to him as I told him the story and gave him my brief testimony. I believe he was deeply moved and quite surprised to discover that his gesture years earlier—his winsome witness to me—yielded fruit. I am very grateful for his role.

I don't remember everything that happened in my spiritual journey. But from that point forward my interest in learning about the Bible and theology intensified, and I became more of what you might call a seeker. I wanted to become a Christian—somewhere inside I felt Christianity was true—but certain things still bothered me. I had become interested in learning about the Bible instead of pronouncing judgment on it from a position of abject ignorance.

I took another spiritual step forward in the early eighties, while I was in England on a mini-vacation with my grandfather. We toured the sites there, from the courts to the famous cathedrals to Stonehenge. At one of the cathedrals—perhaps Canterbury—I visited the bookstore and bought a helpful-looking paperback by evangelist and apologist Paul Little: *Know What and Why You Believe*. It was a combination of two of Little's books, *Know What You Believe* and *Know Why You Believe*. The first of those is a primer on Christian doctrine, and the second is a book on apologetics—a defense of the faith. God must have led me to this book because, true to its title, it is a concise yet thorough overview of what and why Christians believe.

When I got back home I read the book and learned a great deal about Christian doctrine that I'd simply never been exposed to before in this

accessible format. Little talks in depth about heaven and hell, angels, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the attributes of God, God's redemptive plan for mankind, and more. He addresses skeptics' challenges to the faith and deals with them persuasively. I was not fully on board yet, mind you, but this was the planting of another important seed.

Around this time I also came across the writings of Josh McDowell, who had become a believer by vigorously studying the evidence for the resurrection and other Christian beliefs in an effort to disprove them. I bought his *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, in which he lays out many abundant proofs for the core claims of Christianity. This book had a significant impact on me and was particularly appealing, I think, because McDowell makes the case for Christianity systematically, thoroughly, and comprehensively—as if he were presenting his case to the court of appeals. I was well on the way to believing in Christianity's truth claims intellectually.

One thing I learned on my sporadic spiritual journey was that mainstream culture's disdain and disrespect for the intellectual integrity of Christianity is unwarranted, and its conceited assumption that Christian beliefs are a product of blind faith, bereft of reason and intellect, is completely false. The formidable arguments Paul Little, Josh McDowell, and others had marshaled were intellectually rigorous and anchored in historical evidence.

It also didn't hurt seeing Ravi Zacharias on television laying out the philosophical foundations of the Christian faith. When I first watched Ravi I was taken by the profound force of his intellect and his ability to articulate and defend the faith. I remember thinking, *Wow, I'd like to see any Christian skeptic listen to Ravi and dare claim that intellectuals can't be Christians or that Christians can't be intellectual.* By then, I had begun to shift sides. I had become sympathetic to Christianity and was rooting for that team, even if I still hadn't joined it. My exposure to Ravi Zacharias, who would later become my friend, was one of the most important seeds yet, not just because of what he said, but how he said it. It was one of the turning points. Ravi and his organization, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), win hearts and minds to Christianity every day all over the world through intellectually vigorous and winsome apologetics and evangelism.

Interestingly, in my exchange with Steve Springer many years ago, though he had no formal training in apologetics, he instinctively employed one of the techniques Ravi Zacharias encourages his students to use. Ravi stresses that when someone approaches a believer with a question about the Christian faith, it is just as important to focus on the questioner as on his question. We must try to understand what is actually bothering him, which may or may not involve intellectual doubts, and try to respond to him in a way that will reach him. Steve instinctively understood that I had intellectual doubts, or at least that I thought I did. He somehow sensed that I wasn't that familiar with the Bible, and that he might reach me by introducing me to certain aspects of it. He narrowed his sights on the questioner: me. Before talking, he listened closely, and then tailored his response to fit my specific needs. This has been a very important lesson for me.

## FIRST STEPS



I continued to pursue God, or maybe, more accurately, He pursued me. I was open to learning more and occasionally reading things on the subject that caught my eye. But it wasn't until I attended a Christian Business Men's Committee (CBMC) prayer breakfast in my hometown that the final seeds were planted. At the end of the program, one of the organizers of the event told us that if we were interested in learning more about Jesus Christ, we should complete the information card that had been left on our tables. Something led me to fill out that form.

Within a few days of the breakfast I received a call from a friend who said he'd been given my card. He asked if I'd be interested in joining a short Bible study with him, another gentleman from CBMC, and two of my other close friends in the community who had also completed their cards at the breakfast. I said, "Sure, why not?"

So the five of us began to meet. The leaders gave us each a *Life Application Bible* and began to lead us through a short introductory booklet titled *First Steps*. The booklet contained four short chapters introducing us to important issues: "Is the Bible Credible?" "Who Is Jesus Christ?" "The Work of Jesus Christ," and "Eternal Life in Christ."

At the direction of the CBMC leaders we worked through and discussed a chapter each week.

In the first pages of the booklet we learned that the Bible consists of sixty-six books written by some forty different authors over a period of about 1,500 years. The authors came from every imaginable background—“kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen and scholars. It was written on at least three different continents in three different languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—yet, there is a thread of continuity from Genesis to Revelation.” Indeed, Scripture is remarkably integrated on a wide variety of subjects and themes, a topic I explore in Chapter 7.

The pamphlet continued, “The Bible contains blatantly honest accounts of the lives of its main characters, exposing their strengths and their weaknesses.”<sup>3</sup> The more I’ve read and learned about the Bible, the more I’ve confirmed this to be true. As R. A. Morey writes,

One of the proofs of the inspiration of the Bible is its realism. It describes the great men and women of God who lived in biblical times as they really were. These great heroes of the faith were men and women with the same weaknesses that plague us.... The Bible paints the portraits of the saints of old with all their warts, moles, and wrinkles intact.... Abraham lied... Jacob was a skunk at times... Moses lost his temper... David had a problem with lust and committed murder.... The Bible could not have been man’s idea. If we had written it, we would have never recorded all the evil things the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles did. We would have presented them as “perfect” examples for us to follow.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Professor Leland Ryken observes that the Bible is realistic precisely because of its “portrayal of unidealized human behavior.... It paints its characters as Cromwell wished to be painted—warts and all.”<sup>5</sup> One Bible scholar notes that the patriarchs of Genesis are so deeply flawed that “they have almost more shadow than light.”<sup>6</sup> As a great example, notice how the apostles show themselves in a bad light, such as when they argue over which of them will be greatest in the Kingdom

of God (Luke 9:46–48). Another instance is when John tries to prevent someone from driving out demons in Jesus' name, presumably because he jealously thinks the disciples' standing might be diminished if others got in on the act.<sup>7</sup>

In the first chapter of the booklet we examined whether the Bible is the inspired Word of God and were introduced to Old Testament prophecies about Jesus Christ. I don't know if I slept through *all* the Sunday school lessons and sermons at my childhood church, but somehow I was woefully unaware of any of these things. I hadn't given much real thought to whether the Bible is actually the Word of God as opposed to a book written by spiritual men laying out traditional moral lessons. I was surprised to discover that the Bible clearly asserts its own divine authority. There is no ambiguity in this passage from the apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

All Scripture comes directly from God. That's a pretty bold claim. Note that Paul does not say that certain biblical passages come from God and others are just man's opinion. "All Scripture is God-breathed." All! I've since learned that this is a strikingly consistent theme of Scripture, and there are no contrary claims within the Bible. Consider a few examples in the Old Testament: "Every word of God is tested" (Prov. 30:5); "The words of the Lord are pure words, as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times" (Psalms 12:6); "And, Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven" (Psalms 119:89).

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms, "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). In his gospel, John says, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (10:35). In his first letter, Peter writes, "But the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Peter 1:25). And in his second letter he writes, "Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20–21).

This idea is carried forward all the way through to Revelation, which unequivocally reaffirms that the Bible takes itself seriously. "Blessed is

the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (1:3). The book ends with a stern admonition regarding the gravity of Scripture and our duty not to distort its sacred words: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (22:18–19).

What particularly caught my attention in the *First Steps* pamphlet was its discussion of some of the most important Old Testament prophecies about Jesus Christ (messianic prophecies) that were fulfilled in the New Testament. This is where things really got interesting for me.

- The prophet Micah, around 700 BC, wrote, “But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2). The Gospel of Matthew records, “Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea” (2:1).
- The prophet Isaiah (ca. 700 BC) prophesied, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).<sup>8</sup> Matthew says, “His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:18).
- Zechariah wrote in 500 BC, “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech. 9:9). In his gospel, John says, “They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!’ Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it” (12:13–14).

- In the tenth century BC David wrote, “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me” (Psalms 41:9). In his gospel, Mark writes, “Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them” (14:10).
- Isaiah further adds, “He was despised and rejected by men... Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). John notes, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11).
- Isaiah recounts, “He... was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 43:12). Matthew tells us, “Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left” (Matt. 27:38).
- In Psalms we read, “They have pierced my hands and my feet” (22:16). John writes, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side” (John 20:27).
- Again from Psalms: “You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay” (16:10). In Acts, the book describing the history of the early Church, it says, “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead” (3:15).
- Psalms says, “You ascended on high” (68:18). In Acts we see the fulfillment of this prophecy: “He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (1:9).

These are but a small sampling of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament that were fulfilled, in minute detail, in the New. I trust if you haven't been exposed to these they will impress you as they did me. I discuss these further in Chapter 8.

Learning of these prophecies represented a tipping point for me. We can always make excuses for why we won't believe; we can challenge the authenticity of the Old Testament writings that recorded these prophecies

or the New Testament writings that documented their fulfillment. Or we can say the Old Testament writings were referring to something else or the New Testament writers conformed their writings to falsely claim fulfillment. But at that point I knew. I didn't doubt that these prophecies had been written in antiquity, long before Jesus was born, and I knew that His life and death represented a specific fulfillment.

A light went on. I knew I was reading a holy book that claimed to be a holy book—*the* holy book. I knew, for the first time in my life, that the Bible was the inspired Word of God. When it finally dawned on me that I was holding in my hands a written communication from the God of the universe, my life changed. I was beyond the point of pretending that intellectual obstacles precluded me from accepting Christianity as true. Sometime later I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

I had spent considerable time reading the classics and had given a great deal of thought to philosophical questions. At one point I believed I had developed, pretty much on my own, an idea of what God was like. I was attempting to mold Him to conform to my worldview at the time. When it hit me that the Bible was the revealed Word of God, I realized how foolish I had been in trying to reinvent the wheel to remake God in my image. I believe philosophy can be a worthy field of study, but I don't think we can improve on the Bible's revealed truths in conveying God's nature and His plan of redemption and salvation for mankind.

The brilliant G. K. Chesterton highlights the distinction between man-generated philosophy and divine revelation. In describing his purpose in writing *Orthodoxy*, he humbly admits that he had attempted "in a vague and personal way ... to state the philosophy in which I have come to believe." But he adds this caveat: "I will not call it my philosophy; for I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me."<sup>9</sup> Dr. Douglas Groothuis, professor of philosophy of religion, captures the significance of Chesterton's admission. "This stress on God's authority and ownership of truth," writes Groothuis, "should give followers of Christ a deep sense of anchorage in a divine reality beyond themselves. Their faith is not a 'religious preference' but has an indissoluble reference to revealed truths."<sup>10</sup>

## GOD'S INSPIRED WORD



Having come to believe the Bible really is God's Word, I decided to begin reading it purposefully and in an entirely different light—with reverence and awe, realizing that as I was reading it, God was literally speaking to me. As Rev. Hugh McIntosh wrote in 1902, "From the viewpoint of practical religion, a Bible believed to be originally true, because inspired of God, is received with deepest reverence as the Word of God."<sup>11</sup> So, on the advice of believers I trusted, I began with the Gospel of John, the last of the four gospels in the New Testament canon and the one that is the most theological in nature.<sup>12</sup>

It's hard to deny that in John's gospel Jesus strongly asserts His own divinity. Yet that is precisely what many do. Granted, on the surface, there are some troubling passages wherein Jesus appears to be deferring to the Father and acknowledging that He is subordinate to Him. But the meaning of those passages becomes clear when we understand that Jesus is not denying His essential equality with the Father, but referring to certain functions within the Triune Godhead. Throughout, Jesus unambiguously maintains that He is God, that He is equal to the Father, and that He and the Father are one.

So as I read and reread this book, I was unable to deny that Jesus clearly claimed to be God, which was powerful stuff, considering that I had now come to believe that the Bible is inspired. Simply stated: God says that Jesus claimed to be God. Wow.

At this point I was on fire and began reading the Bible and everything about the Bible and theology I could get my hands on. I was impatient to accelerate my learning curve so that I could grasp the Bible's full picture. I remember searching in vain for a quick fix that would get me where I wanted to be without having to spend so much time in the dark. I dabbled in various books and software packages, but I soon realized there was simply no good shortcut. I would need to really put my nose to the grindstone and spend some time in Scripture if I hoped to get a better understanding of it.

I resolved to read through the Bible and achieved that goal after a few false starts. For those who would like to read the Bible from cover

to cover, I found a relatively painless way to do it. Not that reading the Bible is painful, but it's daunting to read the entire book. However, I came across *The Daily Bible* by F. LaGard Smith, which presents the books of the Bible in their chronological—as opposed to canonical—order, and breaks it down into 365 daily readings, with a helpful introductory comment for each day's reading. There is no substitute, in my view, for reading the Bible itself in its original form, but this is a great way to get through it the first time. There are endless ways and methods to read the Bible, but I've read from experts, and can confirm from personal experience, that it is important at some point to read the Bible from beginning to end so you can begin to see the big picture—God's story of redemptive history—and understand how it all fits together.

Over the years, I attended numerous Bible studies, participated in many small groups, eventually taught some Sunday school classes, and took a correspondence course on the Old Testament. More recently, I took an Old Testament survey course online from Southern Evangelical Seminary, taught by Dr. Thomas Howe, which was enormously informative. I have been blessed with extremely helpful biblical and spiritual mentors along the way, including, among many others, my pastor Ron Watts, my former neighbor Pastor Steve Johnson, whose brain I picked every chance I had, and my friend—apologist extraordinaire—Frank Turek.

I must admit that even after intellectually embracing the truth of Christianity, I still faltered from time to time. Every once in a while I had to pinch myself and go back through the evidence in my mind. Do I really believe? Do I *really*? I spent so long as a skeptic I suppose it was only natural I'd have some residual baggage for some time.

But I also don't think there's anything wrong with a healthy element of doubt among believers. This doubt spurred me to study, think more, and consider the evidence even more thoroughly. In fact, I must admit that I did not come to believe in Christianity by exhausting all doubts or by understanding God's entire plan. I still had nagging issues about evil and pain and suffering in the world. The notion of eternal damnation also continued to bother me. But at a certain point I could no longer deny the overwhelming weight of the evidence in favor of Christianity. I am now convinced that when you study the evidence in earnest with an open

mind and a willing heart, you can come away with no other conclusion. There are still things I can't fully explain—especially not to the stubborn doubter's satisfaction—but by far, the most reasonable conclusion from the evidence is that the Triune God of the Bible is real, the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the Bible is God's direct, special revelation to us and informs us about God's plan of salvation for mankind, and we ignore it at our peril.

What I want to tell my skeptical high school friends and any other nonbelievers is that I am sure I can't answer every one of your questions to your satisfaction, but if you approach the evidence objectively, you just might come to see the truth of the faith. Even the famous skeptic David Hume, in one of his arguments against the existence of miracles, acknowledged ironically, "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence."<sup>13</sup>

If you read the Bible itself with an open spirit, God will reveal Himself to you. "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). "From infancy, you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). The great British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon says, "It is God's Word, not our comment on God's Word, that saves souls. Souls are slain by the sword, not by the scabbard, nor by the tassels which adorn the hilt of it. If God's Word be brought forward in its native simplicity, no one can stand against it. The adversaries of God must fail before the Word as chaff perishes in the fire. Oh, for wisdom to keep closer and closer to that which the mouth of the Lord hath spoken!"<sup>14</sup>

Rev. Hugh McIntosh makes this bold claim about the divine authority of Scripture: "The clearness and decisiveness of the Bible claim to thorough truthfulness, entire trustworthiness, and Divine authority of all Scripture is the first impression made on every candid mind, on looking at this evidence and the vast amount of it—the immense mass, the impressive array of it; reminding one in its wide scope and massive strength of great mountain ranges, or vast, solid, imposing lines of impregnable fortifications. Even the most cursory view of it must impress this on every open mind."<sup>15</sup> But notice particularly his admonition about the fundamental importance of Scripture to those who are genuinely



and so uniform, should certainly convince us of our inability to reach the good by our own efforts. . . . What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remains to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.”<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, Pascal is more specific about Christianity’s singular ability to fill our void because it is not only true, but it correctly addresses our fallenness. He writes that “the true religion,” in order to make man happy, must prove to him

that there is a God; that we ought to love Him; that our true happiness is to be in Him, and our sole evil is to be separated from Him; it must recognize that we are full of darkness which hinders us from knowing and loving Him; and that thus, as our duties compel us to love God, and our lusts turn us away from Him, we are full of unrighteousness. It must give us an explanation of our opposition to God and to our own good. It must teach us the remedies for these infirmities, and the means of obtaining these remedies. Let us therefore examine all the religions of the world, and see if there be any other than the Christian which is sufficient for this purpose.<sup>22</sup>

None of the brilliant philosophers can provide the answer, he claims. Some of them, intoxicated by human pride and the desire to place man “on an equality with God,” foolishly think the chief good can be found in man. Other religions have not provided the answer either. It can only be found in the one true religion—Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

Paul, in addressing the “men of Athens” about the gospel, tells them that God made “every nation of mankind . . . that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26–27). So we see that one of God’s aims “in revealing Himself both in creation and in history is that people would seek Him.”<sup>24</sup>



A friend once told me he had a far more serious barrier, confessing that he feared he was born with an intrinsic inability to believe. Talk about a paradox: a nonbeliever who is more convinced of predestination than a five-point Calvinist!

May I humbly suggest to my friend that his seeming inability to believe may well be something that is not intellectually based? Some people reject the gospel because they don't want to make a change in their lifestyle. For others, pain or pride may have alienated them from God. Toward the beginning of this chapter I cited Romans 1:19–20 to affirm my childhood experience of instinctively knowing that God exists: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” So, Paul tells us, we are without excuse to deny God's existence.

But there is an important verse—verse 18—that precedes these two and provides insight into why certain recalcitrant people resist the truth. It says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Some people blind themselves to the truth because of sin in their lives or because they don't want to have to account to a moral God. I am not moralizing here, because we are all sinners and this is a common obstacle to faith, even among some people whom we consider to be morally upright and good people. This especially applies to my friend who maintains he is incapable of believing. He is one of the finest people I know.

Concerning pride, some people have difficulty becoming humble enough to admit they need something beyond themselves—a personal savior. That's one reason I have come to believe that pride ranks high in the hierarchy of sins: pride leads us to believe we are spiritually self-sufficient and keeps us from drawing close to God—the very thing for which we were created. As J. N. Oswalt writes, “For those who depend for their very existence on the continued grace of a loving Creator to act as if they are somehow ultimate is the worst trespass upon reality imaginable.”<sup>27</sup>



skepticism and my protracted faith journey. We each communicate differently, we all have an opportunity to reach different people, and every single person is profoundly important. Thankfully, those of us who examine the evidence today are doing so on the shoulders of the megagiants of Christian apologetics, who have laid out the evidentiary case for Christianity compellingly.

So in this book I present evidence for the truth of Christianity's claims and also address some of the nagging questions that persist in the minds of many Christians even after they accept the faith, such as questions concerning science, the problems of pain and suffering, and alleged inconsistencies in the Bible. These questions have answers, and in some cases, while they may not wholly satisfy, they will give us a better understanding and a peace of mind that there are plausible explanations, the full depth of which we just might not be able to comprehend this side of heaven.

I also thought that in addition to presenting a defense of the faith in my own way, I could share some discoveries I've made and insights I've acquired on my spiritual path that have inspired and excited me about the Bible and about Jesus Christ, since such ideas might pique the interest of skeptics and also appeal to believers.

In terms of this book's structure, I don't strictly follow the systematic approach used by some classical apologists, such as that of Dr. Geisler in his classic *Christian Apologetics*. Nor do I exactly follow the twelve-point logical progression laid out by Dr. Geisler and Frank Turek in their book *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, for which I was honored to write the foreword.

I do cover all these points in the book, some in much greater detail than others. They are all important to a comprehensive apologetic, but I spend more time on the ones that had the most impact on me, thinking that I will have a better chance to reach doubters if I address those issues that contributed to my own skepticism. For example, while I discuss the abstract proofs for God's existence and address the question of whether miracles are possible, I don't dwell extensively on these points because I have never doubted the existence of a creator God, nor the existence of miracles, which are hard to deny if you believe in a creator God. I devote much more space to those things that turned my head directly toward

the God of the Bible, such as biblical prophecy, the Bible's unity and historical reliability, other internal and external evidence that the Bible is true, and the attractiveness of biblical teaching, which has had enormous apologetic value for me.

Notice that many of these topics are focused directly on the Bible itself. There is a reason for that. When I told one of my nonbelieving friends I was writing this book, he suggested I refrain from quoting a lot of biblical passages. "You have to understand," he said, "that many of us don't share your high opinion of the Bible, so that's not going to make much of an impression on us." I told him that I respected his opinion, but I couldn't oblige his request. You see, I ultimately arrived at the point of faith not because of what others said about the Bible, as much as their ideas impressed me. It was the Bible itself that won me over—its prophecies, its unity, Jesus' authoritative and attractive teachings, and its overall divine glow. I would rather abandon writing this book altogether than omit quotations from and discussions of the Bible—a vital part of my mission here is to convey its incomparable majesty. But I am only a human being writing about Scripture. To fully grasp its wonder, you must read it for yourself and give it a fair hearing, as I ultimately did.

Another reason I quote abundantly from Scripture is that simply defending the faith might be inadequate if people don't understand something substantive about the faith itself. What's the point of apologetics if the people to whom you are addressing your arguments don't know much about Christianity? I admit that all Christians don't agree on every doctrinal point. But just calling oneself a Christian does not make one a Christian. There are essential beliefs that most Christians do agree on, and it does no one any good to pretend that Christianity can be all things to all people or that it can be molded to fit what we prefer our religion to be. As Alister McGrath laments, "At least some of what passes for Christianity in the world is a pathetic distortion of the real thing."<sup>29</sup>

As such, I discuss a number of theological concepts, with the hope that you will follow up and further explore them. I don't present these in the form of a discussion on theology or Bible doctrine. Instead, I

introduce them more in the context of interesting passages that particularly affected me, thinking they might have some faith-enhancing quality for you.

Some of the insights I share in this book may strike the more mature believer as mundane, but I trust that some will find them as fascinating and riveting as I did. These are insights about the real, living God, Who made us in His image, and Who loved us so much, despite our sinfulness, “that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

But to avail ourselves of this opportunity—of this unmerited gift—we, as sinners, must act. We have a choice, but our choice doesn’t include doing nothing. We must either accept Him or reject Him. “Neutrality is impossible.” We must “become reconciled with God.”<sup>30</sup>

I realize that some Christians are put off by the very idea of apologetics. “Why can’t we just believe and quit trying to over-analyze everything?” they wonder. “Don’t you understand that conversion is a matter of the heart, not of the intellect?”<sup>31</sup> Let me suggest to them that the Bible itself encourages apologetics. “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Even if you have never had doubts of the sort I address in this book, many of us have, and many of us have benefitted immensely from apologetics. As I can attest from personal experience, apologetics is not only for the non-believer, but also for Christians who experience doubt and need their faith reinforced from time to time.

I am also convinced that Christianity is under fierce attack in our culture and throughout the world, and those interested in truth have a duty to defend the faith and the Christian worldview. Our ready defense could have important consequences. Indeed, our children are bombarded with secularist indoctrination from the culture, our educational institutions, the media, and the entertainment industry, all of which tend to glamorize secularism and disparage—and often demonize—Christianity. Christian philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig agrees. He writes,

Christian laymen, too, need to become intellectually engaged. Our churches are filled with Christians who are idling in intellectual neutral. . . . People who simply ride the roller coaster of emotional experience are cheating themselves out of a deeper and richer Christian faith by neglecting the intellectual side of that faith. . . . But the results of being in intellectual neutral extend far beyond oneself. If Christian laymen don't become intellectually engaged, then we are in serious danger of losing our children. In high school and college Christian teenagers are intellectually assaulted on every hand by a barrage of anti-Christian philosophies and attitudes. . . . As I speak in churches around the country, I continually meet parents whose children have left the faith because there was no one in the church to answer their questions. For the sake of our youth, we desperately need informed parents who are equipped to wrestle with the issues at an intellectual level.<sup>32</sup>

Douglas Groothuis makes a related point: "One reason Christianity has failed to exert much influence on the major intellectual institutions of America is that too many Christians hold their beliefs in an uninformed and precarious fashion. Instead of pursuing answers to the toughest questions an unbelieving world can marshal, they attempt to preserve certainty through ignorance and isolation, relying on platitudes rather than arguments."<sup>33</sup>

While we don't have to over-intellectualize our faith, we mustn't shy away from its intellectual riches either. The Bible itself rejects anti-intellectualism. It exhorts us to engage our minds. "Love the Lord your God with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). As God is the ultimate rational being, He wants us to be rational beings as well. He created us that way. "The mind is an essential ingredient of the Christian life," exclaims Jeffrey Spencer. "The mind is the main battleground of spiritual warfare."<sup>34</sup> Christians use their minds to develop Christ-likeness. Paul directs us to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:1-2). Only

with our mind can we discern truth from error, so let's not disengage it. At the very least, as Christians, we must try to strike a balance between the intellectual and experiential aspects of the faith.

As you turn the page to the next chapter, I ask only that you try to approach what follows with an open mind and see where the evidence, the stories, the Bible, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit take you. After having studied the evidence in depth, I am convinced that it proves that the fundamental doctrinal truth claims of Christianity are true beyond a reasonable doubt. I wouldn't have written this book if I didn't have some hope that by reading it, some doubters, with the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, might begin to see this as well. Immediately following the scriptural charge that we must defend our faith is the further admonition, "yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). I sincerely pray that in the pages that follow I approach this subject with the gentleness and respect that it requires.