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QUESTIONS HAVE POWER

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An Invitation

uestions have power; unanswered questions linger. Questions will lead to freedom; unanswered questions can entrap. Questions multiply and require something of us. The longer an unanswered question lurks the more it erodes the confidence to trust in something. Within the church today there exists a deepening chasm of unanswered questions consuming more and more potential “ex-Christians.” Most of us know someone who has walked away from the faith, tragically, because they could not escape the quicksand of an unanswered question. Serious unanswered questions have crept into the church and it has, for the

most part, failed to countermeasure with accessible answers. On the rare occasions when the church attempts to answer an unanswered question, why does it feel so awkward? When we endeavor to speak to the issues of our time, why does it look more like we are diffusing a bomb and less like we are administering an antidote? More often than not, difficult questions are considered to be hazardous waste in the church, which must be dealt with quickly and quietly. In reality, a church that ignores unanswered questions is a church that foments despair, which can lead to individual skepticism and wholesale disbelief.

I will never forget when Sarah, who had grown up in the church, told me about her negative experience with an unanswered question. Using the language of a street gang, she summarized the uncaring approach of her church's response as an "ambush" and "drive-by shooting." She was told, "Don't ask; just believe." She perceived that her church did not even pretend to care about her protracted struggle with doubt. Since when did questioning the Christian faith become a sin? Jesus certainly questioned the religious establishment of His day—*His* religious establishment. Indeed, Jesus asked a myriad of questions. Jesus' personality is impressed on His church, which is not a rickety house of cards, unable to absorb the trending questions of the day. Rather, the Christian faith is open to investigation, buttressed by overpowering evidence and an explanatory power that speaks to, and provides answers for, the deepest yearnings of the heart. That is the church I know. That is the church I was reared in and that I love. I have served the church for as long as I can remember, but the church is not perfect, nor is it designed to be. The church is organic and, at significant moments in history, has undergone self-correction. The church is not an edifice but a people, indeed, a family. It is a people God created in His own image with the freedom and ability to think, to act, and, ultimately, to question.

Having received over four thousand questions via text at our Christian Thinkers Society (CTS) events over a span of six years (2009–2015), I became acutely aware of the need to write *Unanswered: Lasting Truth for Trending Questions*. Christians of all stripes, across the denominational spectrum, submitted questions to CTS—and they were not shy. Being a Southern Baptist, I was honored to be invited to address a Missouri-Synod

Lutheran church in Dallas in 2012, with nearly one thousand people in attendance at a midweek event. I am not sure why it was at this church in particular, or why it had not dawned on me before, but I began to notice recurrent, or “trending,” questions asked at our CTS events and broadcasts. These trending questions were not of the politically charged, polarizing variety that you might expect, either. For example, in chapter 8, “Elephant in the Room,” I describe the astonished look I always receive when I report that the most asked question I have received relates to suicide and related “invisible diseases.” Six recurrent questions dominated the inbox and led us to aggregate them into the six parts of this book, which are:

Part 1: God on Mute: What Do I Do When God Is Silent?

Part 2: Body of Proof: Why Can I Trust in the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus and How Does That Change Things Today?

Part 3: My Invisible Disease: What Christians Must Understand About Suicide and Mental Health

Part 4: Paranormalcy: Understanding the Paranormal Allure Among Christians and How to Escape It

Part 5: Bible-*ish* Christianity: Why Most Christians Know Just Enough About the Bible to Be Dangerous

Part 6: Becoming Job: Why Suffering, Me-Centric Christianity, and a Concierge-God Don't Mix

These questions are not on the periphery, nor are they merely sidebar issues in our churches. They are front and center, and often unaddressed. These unanswered questions are so complex and difficult that many Christians do not even know where to begin to find answers. Please do not be overwhelmed. In the years leading up to this publication, I have had hundreds of conversations and conducted thorough research so that you don't have to. Even so, this book is not meant to be a be-all and end-all. It is a launch point. Recent tragic events within the church (the completed

suicide of Rick Warren's son, Matthew, as well as a host of other suicides among Christian pastors) and outside the church (the hit movie *American Sniper*, dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder) have brought these taboo subjects into sharper focus. Contributing to the confusion is the fact that we live in a time of information immediacy. There is a lot of bad information only a few clicks away that add barriers to the conversation—for example, the notion that an “authentic” Christian cannot complete suicide and if they do they go straight to hell. I think it goes without saying but if not, Google can be counterproductive when attempting to answer these questions within a biblical framework. Regrettably, Scripture twisting is rampant in our misinformation-saturated society. You must be discerning. After several CTS events and broadcasts, I began to wonder if leaders in the church were actually aware how prominent and widespread these unanswered questions were among Christians? After reaching out to other Christian leaders I realized that our experience at CTS, albeit not exhaustive, was representative of what scores of other churches were facing. In a hyper-connected world, we have lost contact with the real questions resounding within our churches.

One of my favorite actors, Steve Carrell, was the commencement speaker at Princeton in 2012. In his brief, fifteen-minute address, he highlighted all the ways in which the world had changed since he was in college. He recalled an instance when he suffered the rejection of actually asking out a girl in person rather than texting her to hilariously underscore how technology has impeded our ability to meaningfully connect with one another. “When I was in college, if we didn't know something, we didn't Google it; we just made an educated guess, or we made it up. We pretended that we knew, and that was good enough!” Inherent within his comments was the notion that all of the technological advances, for all the good they have done, have been isolating. As I watched Steve's presentation, I couldn't help but think of all the questions in the church. Our church members, for all their friending, followers and connections they have in the virtual world, are more detached than ever. Sadly, the church is winded, out of shape, and has fallen behind in the race to reach and influence hearts and minds.

It became apparent to me that Christian bookshelves were “answer-lite” when it came to addressing the latent unanswered questions *within*

the church. There is, in fact, an abundance of riches published by modern Christian apologists addressing the questions of atheists, agnostics, seekers, and other self-described nonbelievers *outside* the church. For all that, there are comparatively few resources for followers of Jesus (including pastors), who, if they are transparent, often struggle to understand and answer their own ever-present questions. As we will see in the pages that follow, the sad reality is that fellow believers—our brothers and sisters in Christ—make destructive decisions every day because of unanswered questions. Within this tension is an unprecedented ministry opportunity for this book.

I do not claim to have all of the answers. Rather, the purpose of this book is to begin a healthy discussion in the church. In an effort to land on solid conclusions and provide helpful answers to these commonly-asked questions, I have stood on the shoulders of some exceptional research and studies, which you will find notated at the end of this book should you desire to drill deeper. I am also indebted to scores of Christians and pastors on church and university campuses for their transparency and courage in raising the flag on these unanswered questions. CTS recently sponsored an event with my friend, Mark Lanier, at Houston Baptist University, my home base and where Christian Thinkers Society is a resident institute. During a ten-minute segment for open Q&A, more than three hundred questions were texted. There is a hunger to find the answers and my prayer is that this book will provide the needed sustenance.

Teaching Christians to Become Thinkers and Thinkers to Become Christians

It is an exciting time to be a Christian, but in many ways it is also more difficult. Not since the days of the Roman Empire have Christians faced so many attacks and challenges to their faith. Yet Jesus of Nazareth has never been more popular, proven by the fact that there are more Jesus followers today than ever before, expanding at a rate of seventy thousand new converts per day.¹

Within this delicate balance I followed the calling of God to launch Christian Thinkers Society within the cut and thrust of a world becoming

increasingly secular, but also more pluralistic—strikingly similar to the first-century world that gave rise to nascent Christianity. CTS is a ministry serving the church, dedicated to inspire Christians and pastors to become thinkers, and thinkers to become Christians.

The church has been reticent to tackle the trending, unanswered questions posed by people in our pews, avoiding the intersection of culture and the Bible. Every generation faces challenges—a crucial calling of their time. We are no different. For Christians today, a great and urgent challenge lies in this: many believers know little of the Bible and still less of theology—the “first things of faith.” On their journeys through life, they meet skeptics who object to Christianity. Yet knowing little of the Bible and its guiding tenets, let alone its story, and failing the biblical call to “*always be ready to give a defense*” (1 Peter 3:15 NKJV), they find themselves unready and ill-equipped to explain why they believe what they believe. What is more, many Christians—particularly those in the age group of 18–34—are falling away from faith, becoming what the media refers to as “nones” (no religious belief).

Amid this disconcerting data, perhaps the most worrisome and persistent trend is that of growing biblical illiteracy among North American youth raised in church settings. Knowing little of Christianity and its great Sourcebook, their faith and commitment withers, like a vine deprived of refreshing water, good soil, and sunlight. Over time, they become “de-converted”—a tragic scenario, too often repeated. CTS is not only committed to turning back the tide of biblical illiteracy, but we are also committed to responding to the frequent literary vandalism and misrepresentation of the Bible, which can pull our faith into a cultural melee.

Yet, amid these daunting challenges, one fact remains: people are hungry for substantive answers to their questions and doubts. CTS is a ministry at the forefront of fostering biblical literacy—deeply committed to following Christ’s call for believers to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind. (See Matthew 22:37.) At the same time, seeking friendship with all questioners and skeptics, CTS thoughtfully challenges them to “doubt their doubts.” The two-fold mission of CTS is this: to commend “first things of faith” *within* the church, and to offer cogent “reasons for hope” to those *outside* the church. Through a compelling array of interactive

events, cutting-edge technology, and the leadership of gifted, caring speakers, CTS is committed to one central goal: to create a respectful setting in which atheists, agnostics, seekers, and believers can feel safe to ask life's greatest questions. Therefore, I have dedicated my life to attempting to answer the unanswered questions within our faith.

Christians Are “Mentally Ill” and “Need a Psychiatrist”

The need for this book was never more apparent to me than after our CTS team filmed an interview with Professor Peter Atkins, (retired) lecturer of chemistry at the University of Oxford and Fellow of Lincoln College. A dear personal friend of Dr. Richard Dawkins, Peter wrote the quintessential textbook on chemistry and his writings are used on scores of campuses around the globe. The focus of our film was to document the rise of the “nones” phenomena. Professor Atkins is an ardent atheist who said that “people who invite Jesus into their hearts are probably mentally ill,” though he qualified it by saying he was not their psychiatrist. Nonetheless, we asked Peter what his reaction was to knowing that his lectures on critical thinking had dismantled the faith of some believers, he responded, “It gives me exceeding pleasure.” Peter also concluded that “Jesus, if He even existed, was probably gay, because He spent so much time with other men” and that Jesus had an archaic and warped view of women. As a Gospels scholar, I take issue with these comments, of course. Though we disagree with his conclusions, it should be noted that Professor Atkins was a most gracious host to our crew and quite willing to share his views. (See chapter 18 “The Problem of Love” for a similar experience with our CTS crew filming at the 2015 National American Atheist Convention in Memphis, Tennessee.)

A serious concern that I have is that many Christians have their heads in the sand (see chapter 19 “Avoid Island Fever”) and are so isolated that they are unaware of how people think who don't follow Jesus. Many are ignorant of what is being said about Christianity in culture. Another purpose of this book is to assist you in understanding these questions in their full context. We face major challenges today. Here is the culture's message

to you as a Christian: “There is no God...*Stupid!*” The second message the culture is peddling is: “Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead. There is nothing special about Him. He was married with a wife, kids, and a mortgage. Later, other people who did not know Him turned Him into a divine being, and Emperor Constantine chose the books of the Bible!”

So the Christian faith is being attacked at two central, or cardinal, teachings: namely, the belief in God, and second, the conviction that God acted decisively through the Messiah, Jesus Christ, His Son, and through His resurrection from the dead. I would not have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes. Richard Dawkins was interviewed on CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360* on April 17, 2008. Dawkins, the entrenched atheist and author of *The God Delusion*, was discussing atheism with the host Anderson Cooper. At one point Cooper cocked his head back while laughing derisively, and asked, “How could anyone be so stupid?” He was talking about *us*. He was calling those of us who believe in God stupid. I could not believe the disrespect and discourtesy, no matter what he privately believes, laughing at “stupid” Christians. Anderson continued the interview by referencing that the Bible discusses a talking snake. These kind of comments slide right by in our post-Christian society. A vulgar *Paper* magazine article, “Free to Be Miley,” documented how Miley Cyrus was raised a Christian but now claimed to be “enlightened.” In reference to the Bible, Miley said, “That’s f-king insane,” adding, “we’ve outgrown that fairy tale, like we’ve outgrown f-king Santa and the tooth fairy.”² In recent years, millennials who grew up watching Miley portray the wholesome Hannah Montana on TV have had to witness her descent into Hannah Montana gone wild.

A battle is raging for the hearts and minds of people all around us. There is ample confusion, yet the scales of truth tip in our favor. There is more evidence available today to prove the claim of Christianity than in any other time in our history. You have more access to information about the Christian faith than did the great Christian leaders of our past. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon knew nothing of the Dead Sea Scrolls (they were not discovered until the mid-twentieth century), and St. Augustine did not have access to the external confirmations of biblical history which was still entombed in the ground and would not to be excavated

for hundreds of years. Those men trusted and thrived in their faith. We are in a golden age of Christianity in which you have a treasure-trove of wisdom and knowledge at your fingertips, which you can use to develop right thinking and vibrant faith, supported by layers of evidence that prove Jesus was who He said He was and achieved all we read that He achieved.

Therefore, we must be aware of what our culture is asking of our faith and we must be prepared to demonstrate why Christianity is believable, acceptable, worthy of our trust and obedience, and overall, a force for good in the world. *Unanswered* is dedicated to you, in the hope that it will provide you with the tools and answers essential for communicating truth to an increasingly skeptical world. The aim of this book is to equip you to speak in an informed and responsible way about the deepest questions that lie at the heart of our modern Christian faith, as a thoughtful ambassador of the Lord, radiating the abundant life of Jesus Christ. These data points identify pressing challenges—but also unique opportunities. Clearly, there is a crying need for churches throughout America to biblically educate people—young people, as well as other age groups. Even though the need is great, the resources available to meet this need have never been greater.

Unanswered: The Journey Begins

Tough questions are being asked about Christianity—inside and outside of the church. Recently one of my students said, “Questions are great, but only if you know the answers!” As I’ve stated, many in today’s church do not know the Bible as well as they should, and people outside the church hardly know it all. Consequently, Christians are ill-equipped to provide the answers our culture and communities desperately need. Christians struggle with their own “big questions” about the faith and don’t know where to turn for answers. Hence, *Unanswered* is a book to be studied as much as it is to be read. There is courage in closing in on the “unanswered” questions with the strength and confidence that springs from being able to respond in a biblically-sound and culturally-sensitive way.

To that end, in partnership with LifeWay Christian Resources, I have produced a companion Bible study that I encourage you to integrate into your time with this book. The study is one hundred twenty-eight pages

and features six weeks of daily, encouraging personal Bible study that correlate with the six questions we are addressing in this book. Furthermore, there is an associated teaching DVD, also created by LifeWay, in which I speak directly to these unanswered questions. The DVD can be viewed by an individual or used by groups in a collective Bible study venue. This book, and the companion resources, has been designed to be both proactive and reactive—reactive with respect to new developments, discoveries, and challenges represented by the unanswered questions within our churches; proactive in providing answers while articulating and clarifying important biblical truths and the evidences that confirm them. The mission of the *Unanswered* series is to provide the essential training to transform and enrich believers, Christian leaders, and pastors, who will be characterized by a thinking faith, capable to communicate confidently, and committed to escape the tendency to offer trite answers to the unanswered questions of a skeptical world.