

# THE CASE FOR FAITH

## A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity

by Lee Strobel

### INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF FAITH

Billy Graham steadied himself by gripping both sides of the podium. He was 80 years old, fighting Parkinson's disease, but he stared intently at the throngs inside the RCA Dome in Indianapolis & spoke in a steady, forceful voice. There was no hint of hesitation, no uncertainty or ambiguity. His sermon was essentially the same simple & direct message he had been preaching for 50 years.

He referenced the chaos & violence around the world, & he zeroed in on the anguish, pain, & confusion in the hearts of individuals. He talked about sin, about forgiveness, about redemption, & about the loneliness, despair, & depression that weigh so many people down.

"All of us want to be loved," he said. "All of us want somebody to love us. Well, I want to tell you that God loves you. He loves you so much that He gave us His Son to die on the cross for our sins. And He loves you so much that He will come into your life & change the direction of your life & make you a new person, whoever you are.

"Are you sure that you know Christ? There comes a moment in which the Spirit of God convicts you, calls you, speaks to you about opening your heart & making certain of your relationship to God. And hundreds of you here tonight are not sure. You'd like to be sure. You'd like to leave here tonight knowing that if you died on the way home, you would be ready to meet God."

So he urged them to come. And they did, nearly 3,000 in all. Some were weeping, gripped by somber conviction; others stared downward, still stewing in shame over their past; many were smiling from ear to ear—liberated, joyous ... home, finally.

What is faith? There would have been no need to define it for these people on that sultry June night. Faith was almost palpable to them. They reached out to God almost as if they were expecting to physically embrace Him. Faith drained them of the guilt that had oppressed them. Faith replaced despondency with hope. Faith infused them with new direction & purpose. Faith unlocked Heaven. Faith was like cool water soaking their parched soul.

But faith isn't always that easy for people. Objections pester them. Doubts mock them. Their hearts want to soar to God; their intellects keep them securely tied down.

For Charles Templeton—ironically, once Billy Graham's pulpit partner & close friend—questions about God have hardened into bitter opposition toward Christianity. Like Graham, Templeton once spoke powerfully to crowds in vast arenas & called for people to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. Some even predicted Templeton would eventually eclipse Graham as an evangelist.

But that was a long time ago. Today Templeton's faith—repeatedly punctured by persistent & obstinate doubts—has leaked away.

### From Faith to Doubt

The year was 1949. Thirty-year-old Billy Graham was unaware that he was on the brink of being catapulted into worldwide fame & influence. Ironically, as he readied himself for his breakthrough crusade in LA, he found himself grappling with uncertainty—not over the existence of God or the divinity of Jesus but over the fundamental issue of whether he could totally trust what his Bible was telling him.

In his autobiography, Graham said he felt as if he were being stretched on a rack. Pulling him toward God was Henrietta Mears, the bright & compassionate Christian educator who had an abounding confidence in the reliability of the Scriptures. Yanking him the other way was Graham's close companion & preaching colleague, 33-year-old Charles Templeton.

According to Templeton, he became a Christian 15 years earlier when he found himself increasingly disgusted with his lifestyle on the sports staff of the Toronto *Globe*. Fresh from a night out at a sleazy strip joint, feeling shoddy & unclean, he went to his room & knelt by his bed in the darkness.

“Suddenly,” he would recall later, “it was as though a black blanket had been draped over me. A sense of guilt pervaded my entire mind & body. The only words that would come were, ‘Lord, come down. Come down...’” And then:

Slowly, a weight began to lift, a weight as heavy as I. It passed through my thighs, my torso, my arms & shoulders, & lifted off. An ineffable warmth began to suffuse my body. It seemed that a light had turned on in my chest & that it had cleansed me.... I hardly dared breathe, fearing that I might alter or end the moment. And I heard myself whispering softly over & over again, “Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” Later, in bed, I lay quietly at the center of a radiant, overwhelming, all-pervasive happiness.

After abandoning journalism for the ministry, Templeton met Graham in 1945 at a Youth for Christ rally. They were [roommates & constant companions during an adventurous tour of Europe](#), alternating in the pulpit as they preached at rallies. [Templeton founded a church that soon overflowed its 1,200-seat sanctuary.](#) *American Magazine* said he “set a new standard for mass evangelism.” His friendship with Graham grew. “He’s [one of the few men I have ever loved in my life,](#)” Graham once told a biographer.

But soon doubts began gnawing at Templeton. “[My reason had begun to challenge & sometimes to rebut the central beliefs](#) of the Christian faith.”

### **A triumph of faith**

Now, there was the skeptical Templeton, a counterpoint to the faith-filled Henrietta Mears, tugging his friend Billy Graham away from her repeated assurances that the Scriptures are trustworthy. “Billy, [you’re 50 years out of date,](#)” he argued. “[People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple.](#)”

Templeton seemed to be winning the tug-of-war. “If I was not exactly doubtful,” Graham would recall, “I was certainly disturbed.” Graham searched the Scriptures for answers, he prayed, he pondered. Finally, in a heavy-hearted walk in the moonlit San Bernardino Mountains, everything came to a climax. Gripping a Bible, Graham dropped to his knees & confessed he couldn’t answer some of the philosophical & psychological questions that Templeton & others were raising.

“I was trying to be on the level with God, but something remained unspoken,” he wrote. “At last the Holy Spirit freed me to say it. ‘Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith! [I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions](#) & doubts, & I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.’”

Rising from his knees, tears in his eyes, Graham said he sensed the power of God as he hadn’t felt it for months. “Not all my questions were answered, but a major bridge had been crossed,” he said. “In my heart & mind, I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought & won.”

For Graham, it was a pivotal moment. For Templeton, though, it was a bitterly disappointing turn of events. Now on different paths, their lives began to diverge.

In the succeeding years, Graham would become the most persuasive & effective evangelist of modern times & one of the most admired men in the world. But what would happen to Templeton? Decimated by doubts, he resigned from the ministry & moved back to Canada, where he became a commentator & novelist.

Templeton’s reasoning had chased away his faith. But are faith & intellect really incompatible? Is it possible to be a thinker & a Bible-believing Christian at the same time?

For me, having lived much of my life as an atheist, the last thing I want is a naive faith built on a paper-thin foundation of wishful thinking or make-believe. I need a faith that’s consistent with reason, not contradictory to it; I want beliefs that are grounded in reality, not detached from it. I need to find out once & for all whether the Christian faith can stand up to scrutiny.

It was time for me to talk face to face with Charles Templeton.

### **From Minister to Agnostic**

Some 500 miles north of where Billy Graham was staging his Indianapolis campaign, I tracked Templeton to a modern high-rise building in a middle-class neighborhood of Toronto. Taking the elevator to the 25<sup>th</sup> floor, I went to a door marked “Penthouse” & used the brass knocker.

Under my arm I carried a copy of Templeton’s latest book, whose title leaves no ambiguity concerning his spiritual perspective. It’s called *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. The often-acerbic tome seeks to eviscerate Christian beliefs, attacking them with passion for being “outdated, demonstrably untrue, & often, in their various manifestations, deleterious to individuals & to society.”

Templeton draws upon a variety of illustrations as he strives to undermine faith in the God of the Bible. But I was especially struck by one moving passage in which he pointed to the horrors of Alzheimer’s disease, describing in gripping detail the way it hideously strips people of their personal identity by rotting their mind & memory. How, he demanded, could a compassionate God allow such a ghastly illness to torture its victims & their loved ones?

The answer, he concluded, is simple: Alzheimer’s would not exist if there were a loving God. And because it does exist, that’s one more bit of persuasive evidence that God does not.

I wasn’t sure what to expect as I waited at Templeton’s doorstep. Would he be as combative as he was in his book? Would he be bitter toward Billy Graham? Would he even go through with our interview? When he had consented in a brief telephone conversation 2 days earlier, he had said vaguely that his health was not good.

Madeleine Templeton, fresh from tending flowers in her rooftop garden, opened the door & greeted me warmly. “I know you’ve come all the way from Chicago,” she said, “but Charles is very sick, I’m sorry to say.”

“I could come back another time,” I offered.

“Well, let’s see how he’s feeling,” she said. At that moment, her 83-year-old husband emerged from his bedroom. “Please excuse me,” he said, clearing his throat, “but I’m not well.” Then he added matter-of-factly: “Actually, I’m dying.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Alzheimer’s disease,” he replied.

Suddenly, I had an insight into at least some of the motivation for his book.

“I’ve had it ... let’s see, has it been 3 years?” he said, furrowing his brow & turning to his wife for help. “That’s right, isn’t it, Madeleine?”

She nodded. “Yes, dear, 3 years.”

“My memory isn’t what it was,” he said. “And, as you may know, Alzheimer’s is always fatal. Always. It sounds melodramatic, but the truth is I’m doomed. Sooner or later, it will kill me. But first, it will take my mind.” He smiled faintly. “It’s already started, I’m afraid. Madeleine can attest to that.”

“Look, I’m sorry to intrude,” I said. “If you’re not feeling up to this . . .”

But Templeton insisted. He ushered me into the living room, & in a matter of minutes he seemed to have mustered fresh energy. He proceeded to describe the events that led to the shedding of his faith in God.

### **The Power of a Picture**

“Was there one thing in particular that caused you to lose your faith in God?” I asked at the outset.

He thought for a moment. “It was a photograph in *Life* magazine,” he said finally. “It was a picture of a black woman in Northern Africa,” he explained. “They were experiencing a devastating drought. And she was holding her dead baby in her arms & looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression. I looked at it & I thought, ‘Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring Creator when all this woman needed was rain?’”

“How could a loving God do this to that woman?” he implored. “Who runs the rain? I don’t; you don’t. *He* does—or that’s what I thought. But when I saw that photograph, I immediately knew it is not possible for this to happen & for there to be a loving God. There was no way. Who else but a fiend could

destroy a baby & virtually kill its mother with agony—when all that was needed was rain?”

“That was the climactic moment,” he said. “And then I began to think further about the world being the creation of God. I started considering the plagues that sweep across parts of the planet & indiscriminately kill—more often than not, painfully—all kinds of people, the ordinary, the decent, & the rotten. And it just became crystal clear to me that it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there is a deity who loves.

“I had preached to hundreds of thousands of people the antithetical message, & then I found to my dismay that I could no longer believe it. To believe it would be to deny the [brain I had been given](#). So I made up my mind that I would leave the ministry. That’s essentially how I came to be agnostic.”

“Define what you mean by that,” I said, since various people have offered different interpretations of that term. “The atheist says there is no God,” he replied. “The Christian & Jew say there is a God. The [agnostic says, ‘I cannot know.’ Not \*do not know\* but \*cannot know\*. I never would presume to say flatly that there is no God. I’m not the embodiment of wisdom. But it is not possible for me to believe in God.](#)”

I hesitated to ask the next question. “As you get older,” I began in a tentative tone, “and you’re facing a disease that’s always fatal, do you—“

“Worry about being wrong?” he interjected. He smiled.

“No, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because [I have spent a lifetime thinking about it. If this were a simplistic conclusion reached on a whim, that would be different](#). But it’s impossible for me to believe that there is any thing or person or being that could be described as a loving God who could allow what happens in our world daily.”

“Would you *like* to believe?” I asked.

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “[If I could, I would](#). I’m 83 years old. I’ve got Alzheimer’s. I’m dying, for goodness sake! But I’ve spent my life thinking about it & I’m not going to change now. There cannot be, in our world, a loving God.”

## The Illusion of Faith

“As we’re talking, Billy Graham is in the midst of a series of rallies in Indiana,” I told Templeton. “What would you say to the people who’ve stepped forward to put their faith in Christ?”

Templeton’s eyes got wide. “Why, I wouldn’t interfere in their lives at all,” he replied. “[If a person has faith & it makes them a better individual, then I’m all for that—even if I think they’re nuts](#). Having been a Christian, I know how important it is to people’s lives—how it alters their decisions, [how it helps them deal with difficult problems. For most people, it’s a boon beyond description](#). But is it because there is a God? No, it’s not.”

Templeton’s [voice carried no condescension, & yet the implications of what he was saying were thoroughly patronizing](#).

“What about Billy Graham himself?” I asked. “You said in your book that you feel sorry for him.”

“Oh, no, no,” he insisted, contrary to his writings. “Who am I to feel sorry for what another man believes? I may regret it on his behalf, if I may put it that way, because he has closed his mind to reality. But would I wish him ill? Not for anything at all!”

Templeton glanced over to an adjacent glass coffee table where Billy Graham’s autobiography was sitting.

“Billy is pure gold,” he remarked fondly. “[There’s no feigning or fakery in him. He’s a first-rate human being. Billy is profoundly Christian—he’s the genuine goods, as they say. He sincerely believes—unquestionably. He is as wholesome & faithful as anyone can be.](#)”

And what about Jesus? I wanted to know what Templeton thought of the cornerstone of Christianity. “Do you believe Jesus ever lived?” I asked.

“No question,” came the quick reply.

“Did he think He was God?”

He shook his head. “That would have been the last thought that would have entered his mind.”

“And His teaching—did you admire what He taught?”

“Well, he wasn’t a very good preacher. What he said was too simple. He hadn’t thought about it. He hadn’t agonized over the biggest question there is to ask.”

“Which is . . .”

“Is there a God? How could anyone believe in a God who does, or allows, what goes on in the world?”

“And so how do you assess this Jesus?” It seemed like the next logical question—but I wasn’t ready for the response it would evoke.

### **The Allure of Jesus**

Templeton’s body language softened. It was as if he suddenly felt relaxed & comfortable in talking about an old & dear friend. His voice, which at times had displayed such a sharp & insistent edge, now took on a melancholy & reflective tone. His guard seemingly down, he spoke in an unhurried pace, almost nostalgically, carefully choosing his words as he talked about Jesus.

“He was,” Templeton began, “the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I’ve ever encountered in my life or in my readings. His commitment was total & led to his own death, much to the detriment of the world. What could one say about him except that this was a form of greatness?”

I was taken aback. “You sound like you really care about him,” I said.

“Well, yes, he’s the most important thing in my life,” came his reply. “I ... I ... I,” he stuttered, searching for the right word, “I know it may sound strange, but I have to say ... I adore him!”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. “You say that with some emotion,” I said.

“Well, yes. Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. Just look at Jesus. There’s no question that he had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest compassion, of any human being in history. There have been many other wonderful people, but Jesus is Jesus.”

“And so the world would do well to emulate him?”

“Oh, my goodness, yes! I have tried—& try is as far as I can go—to act as I have believed he would act. That doesn’t mean I could read his mind, because one of the most fascinating things about him was that he often did the opposite thing you’d expect—

“In my view,” he declared, “he is the most important human being who has ever existed.”

That’s when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. “And if I may put it this way,” he said as his voice began to crack, “I... miss ... him!”

With that, tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head & looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept.

Templeton fought to compose himself. I could tell it wasn’t like him to lose control in front of a stranger. He sighed deeply & wiped away a tear. After a few more awkward moments, he waved his hand dismissively. Finally, quietly but adamantly, he insisted: “Enough of that.”

But I couldn’t let it go. Nor could I gloss over Templeton’s pointed but heartfelt objections about God. Clearly, they demanded a response.

For him, as well as for me.

### **ON THE ROAD TO ANSWERS**

A short time after the interview with Charles Templeton, my wife, Leslie, & I began driving back to Chicago, spending much of the way in an animated discussion about my enigmatic encounter with the former evangelist.

“It sounds like you really like Templeton,” Leslie remarked at one point.

“I do,” I said.

The truth is that my heart went out to him. He hungers for faith; he conceded as much. As someone facing death, he has every incentive to want to believe in God. There’s an undeniable pull toward Jesus that clearly comes from deep inside him. But then there are those **formidable intellectual barriers that stand squarely** in his path.

Like Templeton, I’ve always been someone who has grappled with questions. In my former role as legal affairs editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, **I had been notorious for raising what I called “Yes, but” objections**. Yes, I could see that the evidence in a trial was pointing toward a certain verdict, *but* what about that inconsistency, or this flaw, or that weak link? Yes, the prosecutor may have presented a convincing case for the defendant’s guilt, but what about his alibi or the lack of fingerprints?

And the same was true of my personal investigation of Jesus. **I started out as an atheist, utterly convinced that God didn’t create people but that people created God in a pathetic effort to explain the unknown & temper their overpowering fear of death**. My previous book, *The Case for Christ*, described my nearly 2-year examination of the historical evidence that pointed me toward the verdict that God really exists & that Jesus actually is His unique Son.

But that hadn’t been enough to completely settle the matter for me. There were still those nagging objections. Yes, I could see how the historical evidence for Jesus’ resurrection can support a verdict that He’s divine, but what about the flurry of problems that raises?

- If there’s a loving God, why does this pain-wracked world groan under so much suffering & evil?
- If the **miracles of God contradict science, then how can any rational person believe** that they’re true?
- If God really created the universe, **why does the persuasive evidence of science compel so many to conclude that the unguided process of evolution** accounts for life?
- If God is morally pure, how can He sanction the slaughter of innocent children as the Old Testament says He did?
- If Jesus is the only way to Heaven, then what about the millions of people who have never heard of Him?
- If God is the ultimate overseer of the Church, why has it been **rife with hypocrisy & brutality** throughout the ages?
- If I’m still plagued by doubts, then is it still possible to be a Christian?

These are among the most commonly posed questions about God.

## Overcoming Objections

While I could relate to many of the objections that Templeton had raised, at the same time **I wasn’t native enough to accept each of them at face value**. It was clear that some of his obstacles to faith shouldn’t be impediments at all.

For example, Templeton was plain wrong about Jesus considering Himself to be a mere human being. Even if you go back to the earliest & most primitive information about Him—data that could not have been tainted by legendary development—you find that **Jesus undoubtedly saw Himself in transcendent, divine, & messianic terms**.

In fact, here’s an **irony: the very historical documents that Templeton relied upon for his information about the inspiring moral life of Jesus are actually the exact same records that repeatedly affirm His deity**. So if Templeton is willing to accept their accuracy concerning Jesus’ character, then he also ought to consider them trustworthy when they assert that Jesus claimed to be divine & then backed up that assertion by rising from the dead.

In addition, the resurrection of Jesus could not have been a legend as Templeton claimed. The Apostle Paul preserved a creed of the Early Church that was based on eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ return from the dead—& which various scholars have **dated to as early as 24-36 months after Jesus’ death**. **That’s far too quick for mythology to have tainted the record**. The truth is that nobody has ever been able to show one example in history of a legend developing that quickly & wiping out a solid core of historical truth

As I systematically documented in *The Case for Christ*, the eyewitness evidence, the corroborating evidence, the documentary evidence, the scientific evidence, the psychological evidence, the “fingerprint” or prophetic evidence, & other historical data point powerfully toward the conclusion that Jesus really is God’s one & only Son.

Yes, but ... What about those nettlesome issues that hinder Templeton from embracing the faith that he admittedly desires so much to have?

### **Traveling the Same Path**

I couldn’t let Templeton’s questions go. They resonated too deeply with my own. So I decided to retrace & expand upon my spiritual journey in a different direction than I had pursued when I wrote *The Case for Christ*, which was an investigation of the historical evidence for the life, death, & resurrection of Jesus Christ. I wanted to determine once again whether there are soul-satisfying responses when Christianity is confronted with life’s harshest & most perplexing questions that send nagging doubts into our hearts & minds.

I resolved to track down the most knowledgeable & ardent defenders of Christianity. My intent was not to take a cynical or confrontational approach by badgering them with nitpicking questions or seeing whether I could trick them into painting themselves into a rhetorical corner. This wasn’t a game to me.

I was sincerely interested in determining whether they had rational answers to these common questions. I wanted to give them ample opportunity to spell out their reasoning & evidence in detail so that, in the end, I could evaluate whether their positions made sense. Most of all, I wanted to find out whether God was telling the truth when He said, “You will seek Me & find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.”

### **OBJECTION: SINCE EVIL & SUFFERING EXIST, A LOVING GOD CANNOT**

As an idealistic young reporter fresh out of journalism school, one of my first assignments at the *Chicago Tribune* was to write a 30-part series in which I would profile destitute families living in the city. Having been raised in the suburbs, where being “needy” meant having only one Cadillac, I quickly found myself immersed in Chicago’s underbelly of deprivation & desperation. In a way, my experience was akin to Charles Templeton’s reaction to the photo of the African woman with her deceased baby.

Just a short drive from Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, where stately Tribune Tower rubs shoulders with elegant fashion boutiques & luxury hotels, I walked into the tiny, dim, & barren hovel being shared by 60-year-old Perfecta de Jesus & her 2 granddaughters. They had lived there about a month, ever since their previous cockroach-infested tenement erupted in flames.

Perfecta, frail & sickly, had run out of money weeks earlier & had received a small amount of emergency food stamps. She stretched the food by serving only rice & beans with bits of meat for meal after meal. The meat ran out quickly. Then the beans. Now all that was left was a handful of rice. When the overdue public-aid check would finally come, it would be quickly consumed by the rent & utility bills, & the family would be right back where it started.

The apartment was almost completely empty, without furniture, appliances, or carpets. Words echoed off the bare walls & cold wooden floor. When her 11-year-old granddaughter, Lydia, would set off for her half-mile walk to school on the biting cold winter mornings, she would wear only a thin gray sweater over her short-sleeved, print dress. Halfway to school, she would give the sweater to her shivering 13-year-old sister, Jenny, clad in just a sleeveless dress, who would wrap the sweater around herself for the rest of the way. Those were the only clothes they owned.

“I try to take care of the girls as best I can,” Perfecta explained to me in Spanish. “They are good. They don’t complain.”

Hours later, safely back in my plush lakefront high-rise with an inspiring view of Chicago’s

wealthiest neighborhoods, I felt staggered by the contrast. If there is a God, why would kind & decent people like Perfecta & her grandchildren be cold & hungry in the midst of one of the greatest cities in the world? Day after day as I conducted research for my series, I encountered people in circumstances that were similar or even worse. My response was to settle deeper into my atheism.

Hardships, suffering, heartbreak, man's inhumanity to man—those were my daily diet as a journalist. This wasn't looking at magazine photos from faraway places; this was the grit & pain of life, up close & personal.

I've looked into the eyes of a young mother who had just been told that her **only daughter had been molested, mutilated, & murdered**. I've listened to courtroom testimony describing gruesome horrors that had been perpetrated against innocent victims. I've visited **noisy & chaotic prisons, the trash heaps of society; low-budget nursing homes where the elderly languish after being abandoned by their loved ones; pediatric hospital wards where emaciated children fight vainly against the inexorable advance of cancer; & crime-addled inner cities where drug trafficking & drive-by shootings are all too common.**

But nothing shocked me as much as my visit to the slums of Bombay, India. Lining both sides of the noisy, filthy, congested streets, as far as the eye could see, were **small cardboard & burlap shanties, situated right next to the road** where buses & cars would spew their exhaust & soot. **Naked children played in the open sewage ditches that coursed through the area. People with missing limbs or bodies contorted by deformities sat passively in the dirt. Insects buzzed everywhere.** It was a horrific scene, a place where, one taxi driver told me, **people are born on the sidewalk, live their entire lives on the sidewalk, & die a premature death on the sidewalk.**

Then I came face-to-face with a 10-year-old boy, about the same age as my son Kyle at the time. The Indian **child was scrawny & malnourished, his hair filthy & matted. One eye was diseased & half closed; the other stared vacantly. Blood oozed from scabs on his face. He extended his hand & mumbled something in Hindi, apparently begging for coins. But his voice was a dull, lifeless monotone, as if he didn't expect any response. As if he had been drained of all hope.**

Where was God in that festering hellhole? If He loved these people, why didn't He show it by rescuing them?

### **Making Sense of Suffering**

Everyone has encountered pain & sorrow. Heart disease claimed my father when he should have had many years left to see his grandchildren grow up. I kept a vigil at a neonatal **intensive care unit as my newborn daughter battled a mysterious illness that both threatened her life & baffled her doctors.** I've rushed to the hospital after the anguished call of a friend whose **daughter had been hit by a drunk driver, & I was holding their hands at the moment life slipped away from her. I've had to break the news to a friend's 2 small children that their mother had committed suicide. I've seen childhood buddies succumb to cancer, to Lou Gehrig's disease, to heart ailments, to car accidents. I've seen Alzheimer's ravage the mind of a loved one.** I'm sure you could tell similar stories of personal pain.

We recently emerged from a **century unprecedented in its cruelty & inhumanity**, where victims of tyrants like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, & Mao Tse-tung are numbered in the tens of millions. The vastness of the cruelty numbs our minds, but then occasionally we come across a story that personalizes the horror & makes us shudder anew.

We read about horrible evils like the Holocaust, the **Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocide of Rwanda,** & the torture chambers of South America—and we can't help but wonder: *Where is God?* We watch TV coverage of earthquakes & hurricanes in which thousands perish, & we wonder: *Why didn't God stop it?* We read the statistic that **1,000 million people in the world lack the basic necessities of life,** & we wonder: *Why doesn't God care?* We may suffer ourselves with **persistent pain or aching loss or seemingly hopeless circumstances, & we wonder: Why doesn't God help?** If He is loving & if He is all-powerful & if He is good, then surely all of this suffering should not exist. And yet it does.

**What's worse, it's often the innocent who are victimized.** "If only villains got broken backs or



cancers, if only cheaters & crooks got Parkinson's disease, we should see a sort of celestial justice in the universe," wrote [agnostic-turned-Christian Sheldon Vanauken](#).

But, as it is, a sweet-tempered child lies dying of a brain tumor, a happy young wife sees her husband & child killed before her eyes by a drunken driver; & ... we soundlessly scream, "Why? Why?" How could a good God, a loving God, do that? [How could He even let it happen?](#)

In fact, this is the single biggest obstacle for spiritual seekers. I commissioned George Barna, the public opinion pollster, to conduct a national survey in which he asked a scientifically selected cross-section of adults: "If you could ask God only one question & you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The top response, offered by 17% of those who said they had a question, was: "Why is there pain & suffering in the world?"

I placed a call to Boston College & asked to make an appointment with the author of *Making Sense Out of Suffering*—a book whose title summed up exactly what I was seeking to do.

### **INTERVIEW: PETER JOHN KREEFT, PH.D.**

I like to refer to Peter Kreeft as "the un-philosopher." Not that he isn't a philosopher; in fact, he's a first-rate philosophical thinker, with a [doctorate from Fordham University](#), [postgraduate study at Yale University](#), & [38 years of experience as a philosophy professor](#) at Villanova University & (since 1965) Boston College. He has earned such honors as the Woodrow Wilson & Yale-Sterling fellowships.

Still, if you were to conjure up a mental image of a stereotypical philosopher, Kreeft would probably not come to mind. Unfairly or not, [philosophers are generally imagined to be a bit boring, speaking in vague & convoluted sentences, residing in the cloistered ivory towers of academia, & being serious to the point of dour.](#)

In contrast, Kreeft gives [real-world answers in an engaging & even entertaining way; communicates crisply, often with a memorable twist of a phrase; wears a bemused grin & can't restrain himself from cracking jokes about even the most sacrosanct subject; and, although he's 62 years old, can frequently be found at any given beach pursuing his hobby of surfing.](#) Kreeft, a Catholic also widely read by Protestants, has written more than 40 books.

I encountered Kreeft's [offbeat sense of humor even before I walked into his office.](#) While the other 16 office doors on his drab & dimly lit corridor were undefaced, Kreeft's was [festooned with Doonesbury & Dilbert cartoons & other tongue-in-cheek mementos](#)—a drawing of a bull with a slash through it, a photo of Albert Einstein playfully sticking out his tongue, & a cartoon in which [Satan greets people in Hell by saying: "You'll find that there's no right or wrong here—just what works for you."](#)

We started by casually chatting about [his beloved Boston Red Sox](#)—an appropriate subject given our [topic of suffering.](#)

But then I turned a corner. There was [no other approach than to hit Kreeft head-on with Templeton's blunt objections](#) to Christianity, embodied by that *Life* magazine photo of an anguished mother clutching her dead infant in drought-ravaged Africa.

### **A Bear, a Trap, a Hunter, & God**

Confronting Kreeft with the same emotional intensity that Templeton had displayed to me, I described the photo & then quoted the former evangelist word for word:

I thought, "Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring Creator when all this woman needed was rain?" How could a loving God do this to that woman? Who runs the rain? I don't; you don't. He does—or that's what I thought. But when I saw that photograph, I immediately knew it is not possible for this to happen & for there to be a loving God. There was no way. [Who else but a fiend could destroy a baby & virtually kill its mother with agony](#)—when all that was needed was rain?... And then I began ... considering the plagues that sweep across parts of the planet & indiscriminately kill ... & it just became crystal clear to me that it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there is a deity who loves.

“Dr. Kreeft, you’re an intelligent person & you believe in a deity Who loves. How in the world would you respond to Templeton?”

Kreeft cleared his throat. “First of all,” he began, “I’d focus on his words, ‘it is not possible.’ **Even David Hume, one of history’s most famous skeptics, said it’s just barely possible that God exists.** That’s at least a somewhat reasonable position—to say that there’s at least a small possibility. But to say there’s no possibility that a loving God Who knows far more than we do, including about our future, could possibly tolerate such evil as Templeton sees in Africa—well, that **strikes me as intellectually arrogant.**”

That took me aback. “Really?” I asked. “How so?”

**“How can a mere finite human be sure that infinite wisdom would not tolerate certain short-range evils in order for more long-range goods that we couldn’t foresee?”** he asked.

I could see his point but needed an example. “Elaborate a bit,” I prodded.

Kreeft thought for a moment. “Look at it this way,” he said. “Would you agree that the difference between us & God is greater than the difference between us &, say, a bear?”

I nodded.

“Okay, then, imagine a bear in a trap & a hunter who, out of sympathy, wants to liberate him. He tries to win the bear’s confidence, but he can’t do it, so he has to shoot the bear full of drugs. The bear, however, thinks this is an attack & that the hunter is trying to kill him. He doesn’t realize that this is being done out of compassion.

“Then, in order to get the bear out of the trap, the hunter has to push him further into the trap to release the tension on the spring. If the bear were semiconscious at that point, he would be even more convinced that the hunter was his enemy who was out to cause him suffering & pain. But the bear would be wrong. He reaches this incorrect conclusion because he’s not a human being.”

Kreeft let the illustration soak in for a moment. “Now,” he concluded, “how can anyone be certain that’s not an analogy between us & God? I believe God does the same to us sometimes, & we can’t comprehend why He does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the hunter. As the bear could have trusted the hunter, so we can trust God.”

## **Faith & Prejudice**

“However,” he said, “I certainly don’t want to demean Templeton. **He’s responding in a very honest & heartfelt way** to the fact that something counts against God. **Only in a world where faith is difficult can faith exist.** I don’t have faith in 2 plus 2 equals 4 or in the noonday sun. Those are beyond question. But Scripture describes God as a hidden God. You have to make an effort of faith to find Him. There are clues you can follow.

“And if that weren’t so, if there were something more or less than clues, it’s **difficult for me to understand how we could really be free to make a choice about Him. If we had absolute proof instead of clues, then you could no more deny God than you could deny the sun.** If we had no evidence at all, you could never get there. God gives us just enough evidence so that those who want Him can have Him. Those who want to follow the clues will.

“The Bible says, ‘Seek & you shall find.’ It doesn’t say everybody will find Him; it doesn’t say nobody will find Him. Some will find. Who? Those who seek. Those whose hearts are set on finding Him & who follow the clues.

**“In this world there is evidence against & evidence for God. Augustine put it very simply: ‘If there is no God, why is there so much good? If there is a God, why is there so much evil?’**

“There’s no question that the existence of evil is one argument against God—but in one of my books I summarize 20 arguments that point persuasively in the other direction, in favor of the existence of God. **Atheists must answer all 20 arguments; theists must only answer one.** However, each of us gets to cast a vote. Faith is active; it demands a response. Unlike reason, which bows down faithfully to the evidence, faith is prejudiced.”

That last word jumped out at me. “What do you mean, ‘prejudiced’?”

“Suppose a policeman came into this room & said they just captured my wife in the act of murdering 13 neighbors by chopping off their heads, & they have witnesses. I would laugh at him. I would say, ‘No, this cannot be. You do not know her as I do.’ He would say, ‘Where’s your evidence?’ I’d say, ‘It’s of a different kind than yours. But there is evidence that this could not be.’ So I’m prejudiced.

“However, my prejudice is a reasonable prejudice because it’s based on the evidence I’ve gathered in my very real experience. So someone who knows God has evidence—& therefore prejudices based on that evidence—which someone who does not know God does not have.”

## Evil as Evidence for God

Kreeft stopped for a few seconds before adding this unexpected & counter-intuitive remark: “Besides, the evidence of evil & suffering can go both ways—it can actually be used in *favor* of God.”

“Consider this,” Kreeft said. “If Templeton is right in responding to these events with outrage, that presupposes there really is a difference between good & evil. The fact that he’s using the standard of good to judge evil—the fact that he’s saying quite rightly that this horrible suffering isn’t what ought to be—means that he has a notion of what *ought* to be; that this notion corresponds to something real; & that there is, therefore, a reality called the Supreme Good. Well, that’s another name for God.”

I summarized Kreeft’s point to see if I understood it. “You mean that unintentionally Templeton may be testifying to the reality of God because **by recognizing evil he’s assuming there’s an objective standard on which it’s based?**”

“Right. If I give one student a 90 & another an 80, that presupposes that 100 is a real standard. And my point is this: if there is no God, where did we get the standard of goodness by which we judge evil as evil?”

“What’s more, **as C.S. Lewis said**, ‘If the universe is so bad ... how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise & good Creator?’ In other words, the very presence of these ideas in our minds—that is, the idea of evil, thus of goodness & of God as the origin & standard of goodness—needs to be accounted for.”

**An interesting counter-punch, I mused.** “Are there any other ways in which you believe evil works against atheism?” I asked.

“Yes, there are,” he replied. “If there is no Creator & therefore no moment of Creation, then everything is the result of evolution. If there was no beginning or first cause, then the universe must have always existed. That means the universe has been evolving for an infinite period of time—&, by now, everything should already be perfect. There would have been plenty of time for evolution to have finished & evil to have been vanquished. But there still is evil & suffering & imperfection & that proves the atheist wrong about the universe.”

“Then atheism,” I said, “is an inadequate answer to the problem of evil?”

“It’s an easy answer—maybe, if I may use the word, a cheap answer,” he said. **“Atheism is cheap on people, because it snobbishly says 9 out of 10 people through history have been wrong about God & have had a lie at the core of their hearts.**

“Think about that. **How is it possible that over 90% of all the human beings who have ever lived—usually in far more painful circumstances than we—could believe in God?** The objective evidence, just looking at the balance of pleasure & suffering in the world, would not seem to justify believing in an absolutely good God. Yet this has been almost universally believed.

**“Are they all crazy? Well, I suppose you can believe that if you’re a bit of an elitist.** But maybe, like Leo Tolstoy, we have to learn from the peasants. In his autobiography, he wrestles with the problem of evil. He **saw life had more suffering than pleasure & more evil than good** & was therefore apparently meaningless. He was **so despairing that he was tempted to kill himself.** He said he didn’t know how he could endure.

“Then he said, in effect, **‘Wait a minute—most people *do* endure. Most people have a life that’s harder than mine & yet they find it wonderful.** How can they do that? Not with explanations, but with faith.’

He learned from the peasants & found faith & hope.

“So atheism treats people cheaply. Also, it robs death of meaning, & if death has no meaning, how can life ultimately have meaning? [Atheism cheapens everything it touches](#)—look at the results of communism, the most powerful form of atheism on earth.

“And in the end, when the atheist dies & encounters God instead of the nothingness he had predicted, he’ll recognize that atheism was a cheap answer because it refused the only thing that’s not cheap—the God of infinite value.”

### A Problem of Logic

[Pulling out some notes that I had scrawled on the airplane, I challenged](#) Kreeft with another question.

“Christians believe in 5 things,” I said. “First, God exists. Second, God is all-good. Third, God is all-powerful. Fourth, God is all-wise. And, fifth, evil exists. Now, how can all of those statements be true at the same time?”

An enigmatic smile crept onto Kreeft’s face. “It looks like they can’t be,” he conceded. “I remember a liberal preacher who once tried to dissuade me from taking up with the fundamentalists. He said, ‘There’s a [logical problem here—you can be intelligent, or you can be honest, or you can be a fundamentalist, or any 2 of the 3, but not all 3.](#)’ And my fundamentalist friend said, ‘I’d say, you can be honest, or you can be intelligent, or you can be liberal, or any of the 2, but not all 3.’”

I [laughed at the story](#). “We have the same kind of logical problem here,” I said.

“That’s right. It seems you have to drop one of those beliefs. If God is all-powerful, He can do anything. If God is all-good, He wants only good. If God is all-wise, He knows what is good. So if all of those beliefs are true—& Christians believe they are—then it would seem that the consequence is that no evil can exist.”

“But evil *does* exist,” I said. “Therefore, isn’t it logical to assume that such a God doesn’t exist?”

“No, I’d say one of those beliefs about Him must be false, [or we must not be understanding it in the right way.](#)”

### Attribute #1: God Is All-Powerful

“What does it mean when we say that God is all-powerful?” Kreeft asked, & then he answered his own question: “That means He can do everything that is meaningful, everything that is possible, everything that makes any sense at all. [God cannot make Himself to cease to exist.](#) He cannot make good evil.”

“So,” I said, “there are some things He can’t do even though He’s all-powerful.”

“Precisely *because* He is all powerful, He can’t do some things. He can’t make mistakes. Only weak & stupid beings make mistakes. [One such mistake would be to try to create a self-contradiction, like 2 plus 2 equals 5 or a round square.](#)

“Now, the classic defense of God against the problem of evil is that it’s [not logically possible to have free will & no possibility of moral evil](#). In other words, once God chose to create human beings with free will, then it was up to them, rather than to God, as to whether there was sin or not. That’s what free will means. Built into the situation of God deciding to create human beings is the chance of evil &, consequently, the suffering that results.”

“Then God is the creator of evil.”

“No, He created the *possibility* of evil; people actualized that potentiality. The source of evil is not God’s power but mankind’s freedom. Even an all-powerful God could not have created a world in which people had genuine freedom & yet there was no potentiality for sin, because our freedom includes the possibility of sin within its own meaning. [It’s a self-contradiction—a meaningless nothing—to have a world where there’s real choice while at the same time no possibility of choosing evil.](#) To ask why God didn’t create such a world is [like asking why God didn’t create colorless color or round squares.](#)”

“Then why didn’t God create a world without human freedom?”

“Because that would have been a world without humans. Would it have been a place without hate?”

Yes. A place without suffering? Yes. But it also would have been a world without love, which is the highest value in the universe. That highest good never could have been experienced. **Real love—our love of God & our love of each other—must involve a choice.** But with the granting of that choice comes the possibility that people would choose instead to hate.”

“But look at Genesis,” I said. “God did create a world where people were free & yet there was no sin.”

“That’s precisely what He did,” Kreeft said. “After Creation, He declared that the world was ‘good.’ People were free to choose to love God or turn away from Him. However, such a world is necessarily a place where sin is freely possible—&, indeed, that potentiality for sin was actualized not by God, but by people. The **blame, ultimately, lies with us. He did His part perfectly; we’re the ones who messed up.**

“The evidence is that God is all-powerful. The point to remember is that creating a world where there’s free will & no possibility of sin is a self-contradiction & that opens the door to people choosing evil over God, with suffering being the result. The overwhelming majority of the pain in the world is caused by our choices to kill, to slander, to be selfish, to break our promises, to be reckless.”

### **Attribute #2: God Is All-Knowing**

I asked Kreeft to move on to the next divine quality—God’s omniscience. **He pushed back his chair to get more comfortable, then looked off to the side as he collected his thoughts once more.**

“Let’s begin this way,” he said. “God, if He is all-wise, knows not only the present but the future. And He **knows not only present good & evil but future good & evil.** If His wisdom vastly exceeds ours, as the hunter’s exceeds the bear’s, it is at least possible—contrary to Templeton’s analysis—that a loving God could deliberately tolerate horrible things like starvation because He foresees that in the long run that more people will be better & happier than if He miraculously intervened. That’s at least intellectually possible.”

I shook my head. “That’s still hard to accept,” I said. “It sounds like a cop-out to me.”

“Okay, then, let’s put it to the test,” Kreeft replied. “You see, God has specifically shown us very clearly how this can work. He has demonstrated how the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world ended up resulting in the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m referring to the **death of God Himself on the cross. At the time, nobody saw how anything good could ever result from this tragedy. And yet God foresaw that the result would be the opening of Heaven** to human beings. So the worst tragedy in history brought about the most glorious event in history. And if it happened there—if the ultimate evil can result in the ultimate good—it can happen elsewhere, even in our own individual lives. Here, God lifts the curtain & lets us see it. Elsewhere He simply says, ‘Trust Me.’

“Suppose you’re the Devil. You’re the enemy of God & you want to kill Him, but you can’t. **However, He has this ridiculous weakness of creating & loving human beings, whom you can get at. Aha! Now you’ve got hostages!** So you simply come down into the world, corrupt humankind, & drag some of them to Hell. When God sends prophets to enlighten them, you kill the prophets.

“Then God does the most foolish thing of all—He sends His Own Son & He plays by the rules of the world. You say to yourself, ‘I can’t believe He’s that stupid! Love has addled His brains! All I have to do is inspire some of my agents—Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, the Roman soldiers—& get Him crucified.’ And that’s what you do.

“So there He hangs on the cross—forsaken by man & seemingly by God, bleeding to death & crying, ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ What do you feel now as the Devil? You feel triumph & vindication! But of course you couldn’t be more wrong. This is His supreme triumph & your supreme defeat. He stuck His heel into your mouth & you bit it & that blood destroyed you.

“Now, if that is not a freak occurrence, but it’s a model of the human situation, then when we bleed & when we suffer, as Christ did, maybe the same thing is happening. Maybe this is God’s way of defeating the Devil.

“At the time of the crucifixion, the disciples couldn’t see how anything good could result; similarly, as we face struggles & trials & suffering, we sometimes can’t imagine good emerging. But we’ve seen how it did in the case of Jesus, & we can trust it will in our case too. For instance, the [greatest Christians in history seem to say that their sufferings ended up bringing them the closest to God](#)—so this is the best thing that could happen, not the worst.”

### **Attribute #3: God Is All-Good**

That left us with God’s attribute of goodness. “[Good is a notoriously tricky word](#),” Kreeft began, “because even in human affairs there’s such a wide range of meaning. But the difference, once again, between us & God is certainly greater than the difference between us & animals, & since good varies enormously between us & animals, it must vary even more enormously between us & God.”

“Granted,” I said. “[But if I sat there & did nothing while my child got run over by a truck, I wouldn’t be good in any sense of the word. I’d be an evil father if I did that. And God does the equivalent of that. He sits by & refuses to perform miracles to take us out of dangers even greater than being hit by a truck. So why isn’t He bad?](#)”

Kreeft nodded. “It looks like He is,” he said. “But the fact that God deliberately allows certain things, which if we allowed them would turn us into monsters, doesn’t necessarily count against God.”

“You’ll have to explain why that is,” I said.

“Okay, let me give you an analogy in human relationships,” he replied. “[If I said to my brother, who’s about my age, ‘I could bail you out of a problem but I won’t,’ I would probably be irresponsible & perhaps wicked. But we do that with our children all the time. We don’t do their homework for them. We don’t put a bubble around them & protect them from every hurt.](#)

“I remember when one of my daughters was about 4 or 5 years old & she was trying to thread a needle in Brownies. It was very difficult for her. Every time she tried, she hit herself in the finger & a couple of times she bled. I was watching her, but she didn’t see me. She just kept trying & trying.

“My first instinct was to go & do it for her, since I saw a drop of blood. But wisely I held back, because I said to myself, ‘She can do it.’ After about 5 minutes, she finally did it. I came out of hiding & she said, ‘Daddy, daddy—look what I did! Look at what I did!’ She was so proud she had threaded the needle that she had forgotten all about the pain.

“That time the pain was a good thing for her. I was wise enough to have foreseen it was good for her. Now, certainly God is much wiser than I was with my daughter. So it’s at least possible that God is wise enough to foresee that we need some pain for reasons which we may not understand but which He foresees as being necessary to some eventual good. Therefore, He’s not being evil by allowing that pain to exist.

“[Dentists, athletic trainers, teachers, parents—they all know that sometimes to be good is not to be kind. Certainly there are times when God allows suffering & deprives us of the lesser good of pleasure in order to help us toward the greater good of moral & spiritual education. Even the ancient Greeks believed the gods taught wisdom through suffering.](#)

“[We know that moral character gets formed through hardship, through overcoming obstacles, through enduring despite difficulties. Courage, for example, would be impossible in a world without pain. The Apostle Paul testified to this refining quality of suffering when he wrote that ‘suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; & character, hope.’](#)

“[Let’s face it: we learn from the mistakes we make & the suffering they bring.](#) The universe is a soul-making machine, & part of that process is learning, maturing, & growing through difficult & challenging & painful experiences. The [point of our lives in this world isn’t comfort, but training & preparation for eternity](#). Scripture tells us that even Jesus ‘learned obedience through suffering’—& if that was true for Him, why wouldn’t it be even more true for us?

“Suppose we didn’t have any suffering at all,” he added. “Suppose we had drugs for every pain, free entertainment, free love—[everything but pain. Impossibly spoiled little brats—that’s what we’d become.](#)

“It’s like that old *Twilight Zone* TV show where a gang of bank robbers gets shot & one of them

wakes up walking on fluffy clouds at the golden gate of a celestial city. A kindly white-robed man offers him everything he wants. But soon he's bored with the gold, since everything's free, & with the beautiful girls, who only laugh when he tries to hurt them, since he has a sadistic streak.

"So he summons the St. Peter figure. 'There must be some mistake.' 'No, we make no mistakes here.' 'Can't you send me back to earth?' 'Of course not, you're dead.' 'Well, then, I must belong with my friends in the Other Place. Send me there.' 'Oh, no, we can't do that. Rules, you know.' 'What is this place, anyway?' 'This is the place where you get everything you want.' 'But I thought I was supposed to *like* Heaven.' 'Heaven? Who said anything about Heaven? Heaven is the Other Place.' The point is that a world without suffering appears more like Hell than Heaven."

That seemed hyperbolic. "Do you really believe that?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. In fact, if you don't, then pretend you're God & try to create a better world in your imagination. Try to create utopia. But you have to think through the consequences of everything you try to improve. Every time you use force to prevent evil, you take away freedom. To prevent all evil, you must remove all freedom & reduce people to puppets, which means they would then lack the ability to freely choose love.

"You may end up creating a world of precision that an engineer might like—*maybe*. But one thing's for sure: you'll lose the kind of world that a Father would want."

### The Megaphone of Pain

"Evil people get away with hurting others all the time. Certainly God can't consider that fair," I said. "How can He stand there & watch that happen? Why doesn't He intervene & deal with all the evil in the world?"

"People *aren't* getting away with it," Kreeft insisted. "Justice delayed is not necessarily justice denied. There will come a day when God will settle accounts & people will be held responsible for the evil they've perpetrated & the suffering they've caused. Criticizing God for not doing it right now is like reading half a novel & criticizing the author for not resolving the plot. God will bring accountability at the right time—in fact, the Bible says one reason He's delaying is because some people are still following the clues & have yet to find Him. He's actually delaying the consummation of history out of His great love for them."

"But in the meantime, doesn't the sheer amount of suffering in the world bother you?" I asked. "Couldn't God curtail at least some of the more horrific evil? One philosopher formulated an argument against God this way: First, there is no reason that would justify God in permitting so much evil rather than a lot less; second, if God exists, then there must be such a reason; so, 3, God does not exist."

Kreeft was sympathetic to the problem, but wasn't buying that solution. "That's like saying it's reasonable to believe in God if 6 Jews die in a Holocaust, but not 7. Or 60,000 but not 60,001, or 5,999,999, but not 6 million," he said. "When you translate the general statement 'so much' into particular examples like that, it shows how absurd it is. [There can't be a dividing line.](#)

"It's true that there are some instances where quantity does become quality. For example, boiling water: once a temperature of 212° is reached, you get a new state—gas—& gas laws rather than liquid laws apply. But suffering isn't like that. At what point does suffering disprove the existence of God? No such point can be shown. Besides, because we're not God, we can't say how much suffering is needed. Maybe every single element of pain in the universe is necessary. How can we know?"

I chuckled. "I suppose a person could say, 'If I'm having the pain, then that's too much suffering in the world!'"

Kreeft laughed. "Aha, of course!" he exclaimed. "[If I were God, I wouldn't allow this much pain;](#) God couldn't possibly disagree with me; God did allow this pain; & therefore there is no God."

"You said a moment ago that some pain might be necessary. That indicates there is a meaning to suffering," I said. "If so, what is it?"

"[One purpose of suffering in history has been that it leads to repentance,](#)" he said. "Only after suffering, only after disaster, did Old Testament Israel, do nations, do individual people turn back to God."

Again, let's face it: we learn the hard way. **To quote C.S. Lewis:** 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'

"And, of course, repentance leads to something wonderful—to blessedness, since God is the source of all joy & all life. The outcome is good—in fact, better than good.

"Simply put, I believe that suffering is compatible with God's love if it is medicinal, remedial, & necessary; that is, if we are very sick & desperately need a cure. And that's our situation. Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

"But good people suffer just as much—or sometimes more—than the bad," I pointed out. "How is that fair?"

"Well, **the answer to that is that there are no good people,**" Kreeft replied. "The prophet Jeremiah said that 'from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain,' & the prophet Isaiah said, 'all of us have become like one who is unclean, & all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.' **Our good deeds are stained with self-interest & our demands for justice are mixed with lust for vengeance.** Ironically, it's the best people who most readily recognize & admit their own shortcomings & sin.

"Lewis pointed out that we're not just imperfect people who need growth, but we're rebels who need to lay down our arms. Pain & suffering are frequently the means by which we become motivated to finally surrender to God & to seek the cure of Christ.

"That's what we need most desperately. That's what will bring us the supreme joy of knowing Jesus. Any suffering, the great Christians from history will tell you, is worth that result."

## **Bearing the Pain**

I sat back in my chair & reflected on what Kreeft had said so far. I decided to ask him about a quote from Augustine, who said: "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works unless His omnipotence & goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil." After reading him those words, I said, "Does that mean suffering & evil contain the potential for good?"

"Yes, I believe all suffering contains at least the opportunity for good," came his response, "but not everyone actualizes that potential. Not all of us learn & benefit from suffering; that's where free will comes in. One prisoner in a concentration camp will react quite differently from another, because of the choice each one makes to respond to the environment.

"But just about every human being can reflect on his or her past & say, 'I learned from that hardship. I didn't think I would at the time, but I'm a bigger & better person for having endured it & persevered.' **Even people without religious faith are aware of that dimension of suffering.** And if we can bring good out of evil even without bringing God into the picture, you can imagine how much more, with God's help, evil can work out for the greater good."

Bringing God into the picture, however, raised another issue: if He loves people, how could He emotionally tolerate the ongoing onslaught of pain & suffering? Wouldn't it overwhelm Him? I pulled out Templeton's book & read Kreeft this quote:

Jesus said, "Are not 5 sparrows sold for a penny, & not one of them is forgotten before God; & are you not of more value than many sparrows?" **But if God grieves over the death of one sparrow, how could even His eternal Spirit bear the sickness, suffering, & death of the multiplied millions of men, women, children, animals, birds, & other sensate creatures, in every part of the world, in every century since time began?**

"I think Mr. Templeton is **anthropomorphizing God** by saying, 'I couldn't imagine how any intelligent being could bear this,'" Kreeft said. "And, yes, he's right; we can't imagine it. But we can believe it. God does, in fact, weep over every sparrow & grieve over every evil & every suffering. So the suffering that Christ endured on the cross is literally unimaginable. It's not just what you & I would have experienced in our own finite human agony, physical & mental, but all the sufferings of the world were there.



“Let’s go back to Templeton’s photo of the starving woman in Africa—all she needed was rain. *Where is God?* He was entering into her agony. Not just her physical agony, but her moral agony. *Where is God? Why doesn’t He send the rain?* God’s answer is the Incarnation. He Himself entered into all that agony, He Himself bore all of the pain of this world, & that’s unimaginable & shattering & even more impressive than the divine power of creating the world in the first place.

“Just imagine every single pain in the history of the world, all rolled together into a ball, eaten by God, digested, fully tasted, eternally. In the act of Creating the world, God not only said, let there be pretty little bunny rabbits & flowers & sunsets, but also let there be blood & guts & the buzzing flies around the cross. In a sense, Templeton is right. God is intimately involved in the act of creating a world of suffering. He didn’t do it—we did it—yet He did say, ‘Let this world be.’

“And if He did that & then just sat back & said, ‘Well, it’s your fault after all’—although He’d be perfectly justified in doing that—I don’t see how we could love Him. The fact that He went beyond justice & quite incredibly took all the suffering upon Himself, makes Him so winsome that the answer to suffering is—Kreeft’s eyes darted around the room as he searched for the right words. “The answer,” he said, “is ... how could you not love this Being Who went the extra mile, Who practiced more than He preached, Who entered into our world, Who suffered our pains, Who offers Himself to us in the midst of our sorrows? What more could He do?”

I said, “In effect, then, the answer to Templeton’s question about how could God bear all that suffering is—He did.”

“*He did!*” Kreeft declared. “God’s answer to the problem of suffering is that He came right down into it. Many Christians try to get God off the hook for suffering; God put Himself on the hook, so to speak—on the cross. And therefore the practical conclusion is that if we want to be with God, we have to be with suffering, we have to not avoid the cross, either in thought or in fact. We must go where He is, & the cross is one of the places where He is. And when He sends us the sunrises, we thank Him for the sunrises; when He sends us sunsets & deaths & sufferings & crosses, we thank Him for that too.”

I bristled. “Is it possible, really, to thank God for the pain that befalls us?”

“Yes. In Heaven, we will do exactly that. We will say to God, ‘Thank You so much for this little pain I didn’t understand at the time, & that little pain that I didn’t understand at the time; these I now see were the most precious things in my life.’

“Even if I don’t find myself emotionally capable of doing that right now, even if I cannot honestly say to God in the middle of pain, ‘God, thank You for this pain,’ but have to say instead, ‘Deliver me from evil,’ that’s perfectly right & perfectly honest—yet I believe that’s not the last word. The last words of the Lord’s Prayer aren’t ‘deliver us from evil;’ the last words are, ‘Thine is the glory & the honor.’

“I do think that any fairly mature Christian can look back on his or her life & identify some moment of suffering that made them much closer to God than they had ever thought possible. Before this happened, they would have said, ‘I don’t really see how this can accomplish any good at all,’ but after they emerge from the suffering, they say, ‘That’s amazing. I learned something I never thought I could have learned. I didn’t think that my weak & rebellious will was capable of such strength, but God, with His grace, gave me the strength for a moment.’ If it weren’t for suffering, it wouldn’t have been possible.

“The closeness to God emerges from suffering with remarkable efficiency.”

“You mentioned Heaven,” I said. “And the Bible does talk about our sufferings in this world being light & momentary compared to what God’s followers will experience in Heaven. How does the Heaven part play into all this story?”

Kreeft’s eyes widened. “If it weren’t for that, there would hardly be a story,” he said. “Excise all the references to Heaven from the New Testament & you have very little left. Saint Teresa said, ‘In light of Heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.’ That’s a challenging or even an outrageous statement! But she didn’t speak from the kind of insulated bubble that so many of us live in; she spoke from a life full of suffering.

“The [Apostle Paul uses another outrageous word in a similar context](#) when he’s comparing earthly pleasures with the pleasure of knowing Christ. He said the [privileges of Roman citizenship, of being a Pharisee of the Pharisees, of being highly educated, as to the law blameless—all of this, as compared to knowing Christ, is ‘dung.’](#) That’s a very bold word!

“Similarly, compared with knowing God eternally, compared to the [intimacy with God that Scripture calls a spiritual marriage](#), nothing else counts. If the way to that is through torture, well, torture is nothing compared with that. Yes, it’s enormous in itself, but compared to that, it’s nothing.

“So the answer to Templeton is, yes, you’re perfectly right in saying that this photograph of the African woman is outrageous. This lack of rain, this starvation, is indeed outrageous in itself. And in one sense, the answer is not to figure it out; one answer is to look in the face of God & compare those 2 things.

“On the one side of the scale, this torture or all the tortures of the world; on the other side of the scale, the face of God—the God available to all who seek Him in the midst of their pain. The good of God, the joy of God, is going to infinitely outweigh all of the sufferings—& even the joys—of this world.”

### **The Power of God's Presence**

I was glad that Kreeft had brought the conversation back around to the woman from Templeton’s photograph. “If she were here right now,” I said to Kreeft, “what would you say to her?”

Kreeft didn’t hesitate. “Nothing,” he said simply.

I blinked in disbelief. “*Nothing?*”

“Not at first, anyway,” he said. “I’d let her talk to me. The [founder of an organization for the multiply handicapped says that he works with the handicapped for a very selfish reason: they teach him something much more valuable than he could ever teach them.](#)

“One of my 4 children is moderately handicapped, & I’ve learned more from her than from the other 3. I’ve learned that I’m handicapped & that we’re all handicapped, & listening to her helps me to understand myself.

“So the first thing we’d need to do with this woman is to listen to her. To feel her pain. [We live in a relative bubble of comfort, & we look at pain as an observer, as a philosophical puzzle or theological problem. That’s the wrong way to look at pain.](#) The thing to do with pain is to enter it, be one with her, & then you learn something from it.

“In fact, it’s [significant that most objections to the existence of God from the problem of suffering come from outside observers who are quite comfortable](#), whereas those who actually suffer are, as often as not, made into stronger believers by their suffering.”

That’s a phenomenon many writers have noted. After wide-ranging research into the topic of suffering, Philip Yancey wrote, “As I visited people whose pain far exceeded my own ... I was surprised by its effects. [Suffering seemed as likely to reinforce faith as to sow agnosticism.](#)” Scottish theologian James Stewart said: “[It is the spectators, the people who are outside, looking at the tragedy, from whose ranks the skeptics come; it is not those who are actually in the arena & who know suffering from the inside. Indeed, the fact is that it is the world’s greatest sufferers who have produced the most shining examples of unconquerable faith.](#)”

“Let’s go back to the woman,” I said. “You said we should listen & react to her, which sounds like a good thing. But there must be more.”

“Yes,” he said. “We would want to be Jesus to her, to minister to her, to love her, to comfort her, to embrace her, to weep with her. Our love—a reflection of God’s love—should spur us to help her & others who are hurting.”

Kreeft gestured toward the hallway. “On my door there’s a cartoon of 2 turtles. [One says, ‘Sometimes I’d like to ask why He allows poverty, famine, & injustice when He could do something about it.’ The other turtle says, ‘I’m afraid God might ask me the same question.’](#) Those who have Jesus’ heart toward hurting people need to live out their faith by [alleviating suffering where they can, by making a difference, by embodying His love in practical ways.](#)”

“That cartoon reminds me of the way God likes to turn questions around,” I commented.

“Yes, he’s constantly doing that. This happened to Job. Job was wondering Who God was, because it **looked as if God was a cosmic sadist**. At the end of the book of Job, the all-time classic on the problem of suffering, God finally shows up with the answer—& the answer is a question.

“He says to Job, ‘Who are you? **Are you God? Did you write this script?** Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?’ And Job realizes the answer is no. Then he’s satisfied. Why? *Because he sees God!*

“God didn’t let Job suffer because He lacked love, but because He *did* love, in order to bring Job to the point of **encountering God face to face, which is humanity’s supreme happiness. Job’s suffering hollowed out a big space in him so that God & joy could fill it.**

“As we look at human relationships, what we see is that **lovers don’t want explanations, but presence**. And what God is, essentially, is presence—the doctrine of the Trinity says God is 3 persons Who are present to each other in perfect knowledge & perfect love. That’s why God is infinite joy. And insofar as we can participate in that presence, we too have infinite joy. So that’s what Job has—even on his dung heap, even before he gets any of his worldly goods back—once he sees God face to face.”

### **Every Tear, His Tear**

“The answer, then, to suffering,” I said in trying to sum up where we’ve come, “is not an answer at all.”

“Correct,” he **emphasized, leaning forward as he pleaded his case. “It’s the Answerer. It’s Jesus Himself. It’s not a bunch of words, it’s *the* Word. It’s not a tightly woven philosophical argument; it’s a Person. *The* person. The answer to suffering cannot just be an abstract idea, because this isn’t an abstract issue; it’s a personal issue. It requires a personal response. The answer must be someone, not just something, because the issue involves someone—God, where are you?”**

“Jesus is there, sitting beside us in the lowest places of our lives,” he said. “Are we broken? He was broken, like bread, for us. Are we despised? He was despised & rejected of men. Do we cry out that we can’t take any more? He was a man of sorrows & acquainted with grief. Do people betray us? He was sold out Himself. Are our tenderest relationships broken? He too loved & was rejected. Do people turn from us? They hid their faces from Him as from a leper.

“Does He descend into all of our hells? Yes, He does. **From the depths of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote: ‘No matter how deep our darkness, He is deeper still.’** He not only rose from the dead, He changed the meaning of death & therefore of all the little deaths—the sufferings that anticipate death & make up parts of it.

“He is gassed in Auschwitz. He is sneered at in Soweto. He is mocked in Northern Ireland. He is enslaved in the Sudan. He’s the One we love to hate, yet to us He has chosen to return love. **Every tear we shed becomes His tear. He may not wipe them away yet, but He will.**

“In the end, God has only given us partial explanations,” he said slowly, a shrug in his voice. “Maybe that’s because He saw that a better explanation wouldn’t have been good for us. I don’t know why. As a philosopher, I’m obviously curious. Humanly, I wish He had given us more information.”

With that, he looked fully into my face.

“But He knew Jesus was more than an explanation,” he said firmly. “He’s what we really need. If your friend is sick & dying, the most important thing he wants is not an explanation; he wants you to sit with him. He’s terrified of being alone more than anything else. So God has not left us alone.”

**Kreeft leaned back in his chair & let himself relax. There was only one more thing he wanted me to know.**

“And for that,” he said, “I love Him.”

### **Drawing Good from Evil**

Less than an hour later, everything was quiet in the car as it snaked through Boston’s rain-slickened

streets on the way back to the airport. My friend Marc Harrienger, a long-time Boston resident, had graciously volunteered to drive me to & from Kreeft's office.

Marc had sat through the interview, listening intently from a wooden chair propped up against the wall. This was [not a topic of idle speculation](#) to him.

He broke the silence in the car. "It's true," he said.

"What's true?" I asked.

"What Kreeft said—it's true. I know it. I've lived it." Several years earlier, Marc had been shoveling snow on his driveway when his wife said she was going to move the car & asked him to watch their young daughter. As the car backed out, they were suddenly thrust into the worst nightmare that parents can imagine: their toddler was crushed beneath a wheel.

Like the African woman, Marc has known what it's like to hold a dying child in his arms. While I wasn't able to talk with that grieving mother, I could converse with him.

So deep was Marc's initial despair that he had to ask God to help him breathe, to help him eat, to help him function at the most fundamental level. Otherwise, he was [paralyzed by the emotional pain](#). But he increasingly felt God's presence, His grace, His warmth, His comfort, & very slowly, over time, his wounds began to heal.

Having experienced God at his point of greatest need, Marc would [emerge from this crucible a changed person, abandoning his career in business to attend seminary](#). Through his suffering—though he never would have chosen it, though it was horribly painful, though it was life-shattering at the time—Marc has been transformed into someone who would devote the rest of his life to bringing God's compassion to others who are alone in their desperation.

In the pulpit for the first time, Marc was able to draw on his own experiences with God in the depths of sorrow. [People were captivated because his own loss had given him special insights, empathy, & credibility. In the end, dozens of them responded by saying they too wanted to know this Jesus](#), this God of tears. Now other hearts were being healed because of Marc's having been broken. From one couple's despair emerges new hope for many.

"Sometimes skeptics scoff at the Bible saying that God can cause good to emerge from our pain if we run toward Him instead of away from Him," Marc said. "But I've watched it happen in my own life. I've experienced God's goodness through deep pain, & no skeptic can dispute that. The God Who the skeptic denies is the same God Who held our hands in the deep, dark places, Who strengthened our marriage, Who deepened our faith, Who increased our reliance on Him, Who gave us 2 more children, & Who infused our lives with new purpose & meaning so that we can make a difference to others."

I asked gently, "Do you wish you had more answers about why suffering happens in the first place?"

"We live in a broken world; Jesus was honest enough to tell us we'd have trials & tribulations." Sure, I'd like to understand more about why. But Kreeft's conclusion was right—the ultimate answer is Jesus' presence. That [sounds sappy, I know. But just wait—when your world is rocked, you don't want philosophy or theology as much as you want the reality of Christ](#). He was the answer for me. He was the very answer we needed."

**OBJECTION:  
SINCE MIRACLES CONTRADICT SCIENCE,  
THEY CANNOT BE TRUE**

I knew from my conversation with agnostic Charles Templeton that he had shed his belief in miracles many years ago. Can a person be scientifically sophisticated & still believe in the possibility of miracles?

"My faith can be summed up in this one paradox: I believe in science, & [I believe in God](#)," said nuclear physicist Hugh Siefken. "I plan to continue testifying to both."

He & many other scientists see no inherent conflict between their profession & their conclusion that a miracle-working God is responsible for creating & sustaining the universe.

Is that a form of professional denial? Can a person write off elves & fairies as being fanciful & yet at the same time embrace manna from HEaven, the virgin birth, & the Resurrection as being credible events of history? If miracles are direct violations of natural laws, then how can a reasonable person believe they could ever occur?

I knew that William Lane Craig was a rational man. And I was aware that he has used his considerable intellectual skills to defend the idea that God has—and does—intervene in the world through miraculous acts. I [called him & asked whether he'd be willing to let me question him on the topic.](#)

“Sure,” he said. “Come on down.”

### **INTERVIEW: WILLIAM LANE CRAIG, PH.D.**

Craig has written extensively about miracles, especially the resurrection of Jesus. He holds [doctorates in philosophy from the University of Birmingham](#), England, & in [theology from the University of Munich](#), & is currently a [Research Professor of Philosophy at the Talbot School of Theology](#). He is the [member of 9 professional societies](#), including the American Academy of Religion, Society of Biblical Literature, & the American Philosophical Association.

[He stroked his chin as he listened intently to my first question, which admittedly came with an edge of challenge.](#)

“Okay, Dr. Craig, you’re an intelligent & educated individual,” I began. “Tell me: how can a modern & rational person still believe in babies being born from virgins, people walking on water, & cadavers emerging alive from tombs?”

Craig smiled. “It’s funny you should ask specifically about the virgin birth,” he replied, [“because that was a major stumbling block to my becoming a Christian. I thought it was totally absurd.”](#)

“Really?” I said. “What happened?”

“When the Christian message was first shared with me as a teenager, I had already studied biology. I knew that for the virgin birth to be true, a Y chromosome had to be created out of nothing in Mary’s ovum, because Mary didn’t possess the genetic material to produce a male child. To me, this was utterly fantastic.”

“You’re not alone,” I observed. “Other skeptics have problems with it too. How did you proceed?”

Craig thought back for a moment. “Well, I sort of put that issue aside & became a Christian anyway, even though I didn’t really believe in the virgin birth. But then, after becoming a Christian, it [occurred to me that if I really do believe in a God Who created the universe, then for Him to create a Y chromosome would be child’s play!](#)”

I told Craig that I found it interesting he could have become a Christian despite misgivings about a doctrine as significant as the virgin birth.

“I guess the authenticity of the Person of Jesus & the Truth of His Message were so powerful that they simply overwhelmed any residual doubts that I had,” he replied.

I pressed him by asking, “Weren’t you rushing headlong into something you didn’t totally accept?”

“No, I think this can be a good procedure,” he said. “You don’t need to have all your questions answered to come to faith. You just have to say, ‘The [weight of the evidence seems to show this is true, so even though I don’t have answers to all my questions, I’m going to believe & hope for answers in the long run.](#)’ That’s what happened with me.”

“Does a person have to suspend their critical judgment in order to believe in something as improbable as miracles?”

“Only if you believe that God does not exist!” he stressed. “Then I would agree—the miraculous would be absurd. But if there is a Creator Who designed & brought the universe into being, Who sustains its existence moment by moment, Who is responsible for the very natural laws that govern the physical world, then certainly it’s rational to believe that the miraculous is possible.”

### **Miracles Versus Science**

We were already getting into the interview but we had not yet paused to define our terms. Before

going any further, I knew it was important that we settled on what ‘miracle’ means.

“We throw around the word pretty haphazardly,” I said. Harking back to my day thus far, I added, “For example, I might say, ‘It was a miracle I made my flight to Atlanta,’ or, ‘It’s a miracle I found your house.’ Is that being too loose with the word?”

“Yes, I think it’s a misuse to talk about these things as miracles,” he said.

“Then how do you define the term?”

Craig spelled out his definition with precision. “In the proper sense,” he said, “**a miracle is an event which is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time & place that the event occurs.**”

“But then isn’t there a contradiction between science & miracles?” I asked. “Atheistic philosopher Michael Ruse said, ‘Creationists believe the world started miraculously. But miracles lie outside of science, which by definition deals with the natural, the repeatable, that which is governed by law.’”

“Notice that Ruse does not say miracles are *contradictory* to science,” Craig pointed out. “He says miracles lie *outside* of science, & that’s quite different. I think a Christian who believes in miracles could agree with him on that. He could say that miracles, properly speaking, lie outside the province of natural science—but that’s not to say they contradict science.”

I tried to digest the distinction. “Can you think of another example of something like that?” I asked.

Craig thought for a moment before answering. “Well, **ethics, for instance, lie outside the province of science,**” he replied. “Science doesn’t make ethical judgments. So I wouldn’t necessarily object to Ruse’s statement. He’s saying that the goal of science is to seek natural explanations, & therefore miracles lie outside of the scientific realm.”

Before I could ask another question, Craig spoke up again. “I should add, though, that you can do a theistic form of science. For example, there’s a **whole movement of people like mathematician William Dembski & biochemist Michael Behe who infer by principled means that there is an Intelligent Designer** of the universe & the biological world. They aren’t being arbitrary—from a rational & scientific perspective, they’re concluding from the evidence that there must be an intelligent Creator.”

“So,” I said, “you’re disagreeing with the **great skeptic David Hume**, who defined miracles as being violations of the laws of nature.”

“Yes, absolutely. That’s an improper understanding of miracles,” he said. “You see, **natural laws have implicit *ceteris paribus* conditions—that’s Latin meaning, ‘all other things being equal.’ In other words, natural laws assume that no other natural or supernatural factors are interfering with the operation that the law describes.**”

“Can you give me an example of that?”

Craig’s eyes swept the room in search of an illustration. He finally landed on one as near as his own body.

“Well, it’s a **law of nature that oxygen & potassium combust when they’re combined,**” he explained. “But I have oxygen & potassium in my body, & yet I’m not bursting into flames. Does that mean it’s a **miracle & I’m violating the laws of nature?** No, because the law merely states what happens under idealized conditions, assuming no other factors are interfering. In this case, however, there are other factors interfering with the combustion, & so it doesn’t take place. That’s not a violation of the law.

“Similarly, if there’s a supernatural agent that is working in the natural world, then the idealized conditions described by the law are no longer in effect. The **law isn’t violated because the law has this implicit provision that nothing is messing around with the conditions.**”

I told Craig that his explanation reminded me of a conversation I had several years earlier with J.P. Moreland, the noted philosopher who wrote *Christianity & the Nature of Science*. He used an illustration of the law of gravity, which says that **if you drop an object, it will fall to the earth. But, he said, if an apple falls from a tree & you reach out to catch it before it hits the ground, you’re not violating or negating the law of gravity; you’re merely intervening.**

“Yes, that’s my point with the *ceteris paribus* conditions,” Craig said. “The law of gravity states what

will happen under idealized conditions with no natural or supernatural factors intervening. Catching the apple doesn't overturn the law of gravity or require the formulation of a new law. It's [merely the intervention of a person with free will who overrides the natural causes operative in that particular circumstance](#). And that, essentially, is what God does when He causes a miracle to occur."

## Real Acts of God

Our discussion of miracles prompted me to ask about another point that was made by [Hume, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish skeptic](#). "Hume said the evidence for the uniformity of nature is so conclusive that any evidence for miracles would never be able to overcome it," I pointed out. "For instance, look at the Resurrection. We have thousands of years of uniform evidence that dead people simply do not return from the dead. So Hume says no amount of evidence would be able to overcome that tremendous presumption."

Craig shook his head. "There's no contradiction between believing that men generally stay in their graves & that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. In fact, Christians believe both of these.

"In order to argue against the evidence for the Resurrection, you have to present evidence against the Resurrection itself, not evidence that everybody else has always remained in their grave. So I think [his argument is simply fallacious](#).

"Now, I would agree with Hume that a *natural* resurrection of Jesus from the dead, without any sort of divine intervention, is enormously improbable. But that's not the hypothesis. The hypothesis is God raised Jesus from the dead. That doesn't say anything against the laws of nature, which say dead men don't come back to life naturally."

## Extraordinary Evidence

"Some critics say that the Resurrection is an extraordinary event & therefore it requires extraordinary evidence," I said.

"That [sounds like common sense](#)," he replied. "But it's demonstrably false."

"How so?"

"Probability theorists say that you must weigh the improbability of the event's occurring against the probability that the evidence would be just as it is if the event had not taken place."

Craig rattled off that statement so fast that my mind was having trouble assimilating it. "Whoa," I said, [holding up my hand](#). "You're going to have to slow down & give me an example."

"Okay, look at it this way: Any improbability that you might think resides in the resurrection of Jesus is counterbalanced by the improbability of the empty tomb, Jesus' resurrection appearances, the sudden change in the first disciples taking place if there were no such event as the resurrection of Jesus. Do you see what I mean?"

Yes, I said, [that illustration made his point clear](#). As improbable as the Resurrection might seem to skeptics, this has to be weighed against how improbable it would be to have all of the various historical evidence for its occurrence if it never actually took place.

"So," Craig concluded, "it becomes quite rational to believe in an event like the miraculous resurrection of Jesus. Besides, I look at it this way: if God really exists, then in what sense *is* it improbable that He would raise Jesus from the dead? I can't think of any."

"Have you seen [skeptics who have become believers in Christianity because of the quality & quantity of the evidence for the Resurrection?](#)" I asked.

Craig's eyes got wide. "Oh, yes, certainly!" he said. "I recently met a fellow who became a Christian out of the so-called 'free thought' movement. He looked into the Resurrection & concluded from the evidence that God raised Jesus from the dead. Of course, [his free-thought colleagues bitterly railed against him](#). He said, 'Why are they so hostile? I merely followed the principles of free thought, & this is where the evidence & reason led me!'"

I chuckled. "Are you saying some 'free thought' folks aren't as free thinking as they would have people believe?"

“Frankly,” he replied, “I think many [skeptics act in a close-minded way.](#)”

As a former skeptic myself, I have noticed the same phenomenon. “Are you referring to the fact that some of them rule out even the possibility of miracles from the outset?” I asked.

“Precisely,” Craig said. “Logicians have a term: ‘inference to the best explanation.’ This means you have a body of data to be explained, & then you have a pool of various explanations for that data. You need to choose which explanation from that pool would, if true, best explain the observed data.

“Some skeptics, however, will not allow supernatural explanations even to be in the pool of live options. Consequently, if there is no natural explanation for an event, they’re simply left with ignorance.

“[That’s prejudice.](#) Apart from some proof of atheism, there’s no warrant for excluding supernatural explanations from being a member of the pool of options. If you do put them in that pool, then you’ve got to be an open, honest investigator to see which is the best explanation of any given event.”

## **The Miracles of Jesus**

“Let’s say you’re an honest investigator,” I said, picking up on his last thought. “What would you look for to convince you that something miraculous has occurred?”

“You would have a number of criteria. You would have to investigate to see if something cannot be accounted for in terms of the natural forces that were operable at that time & place. And you’d look for a religio-historical context.”

I wanted to pursue this idea of context. Hume said that if historians uniformly agreed that the Queen of England died & then reappeared alive a month later, he would be inclined to accept any explanation other than God having performed a miracle. I asked Craig for his response to that.

“I would agree that a [miracle without context is ambiguous,](#)” Craig replied. “[The context of a miracle can help us determine if it’s from God or not.](#) For instance, the Queen’s revivification would lack any religious context & would basically be an unexplained anomaly.

“[But that’s not the case with Jesus. His supernatural feats took place in a context charged with religious significance because He performed His miracles & exorcisms as signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God into human history, & they served as an authentication of His Message. And His resurrection comes as the climax to His Own unparalleled life & ministry & His radical claims to divine authority which got Him crucified. This is why the Resurrection gives us pause, while the Queen’s return would only perplex us.](#) Therefore, the religio-historical context is crucial in understanding miraculous events.”

But I pressed further: “*Did Jesus perform miracles? What convinces you that He did?*”

“The fact is that most New Testament critics today admit He performed what we would call miracles. Granted, they may not all believe these were genuine miracles, but the idea of Jesus of Nazareth as a miracle-worker is part of the historical Jesus that’s generally accepted by critics today.”

With that, Craig swiveled his chair & withdrew a file from the shelf behind his desk. He flipped through some pages until he landed the one he was after. “Let me read you a quote from [Rudolf Bultmann, who’s recognized as one of the most skeptical New Testament critics of this century](#)”:

The Christian fellowship was convinced that Jesus had done miracles & they told many stories of miracles about him. Most of these stories contained in the gospels are legendary or are at least dressed up with legend. But, there can be [no doubt that Jesus did such deeds, which were, in his & his contemporaries’ understanding, miracles](#); that is to say, events that were the result of supernatural divine causality. [Doubtless he healed the sick & cast out demons.](#)

Craig closed the file. “Even Bultmann says miracles & exorcisms belong to the historical Jesus. Now, in Bultmann’s day these stories were considered legendary because of the supposed influence of Greco-Roman mythology on the gospels, but scholars today realize this influence was virtually nil.

“In fact,” he concluded, “[the only reason to be skeptical that these were genuine miracles rather than](#)



psychosomatic healings would be philosophical—do you believe that such events can occur or not? The historicity of the events is not in doubt.”

## Miracles & Legends

“What is the specific evidence that Jesus performed miracles?” I asked.

“Part of it is that these events are found in all of the strata of the gospel sources. For example, the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is found in all of the gospels, so you have independent, multiple attestation to these events. There is no vestige of a non-miraculous Jesus of Nazareth in any of the sources; therefore, it’s very likely that this belongs to the historical Jesus.”

“Just because several people said something extraordinary happened—like the feeding of the 5,000—doesn’t necessarily mean it’s true,” I said.

“In one sense, it’s a very individual question of what you will find convincing for yourself,” he replied. “I think we can confidently say there isn’t any reason to be doubtful about these narratives apart from philosophical reasons. In other words, if you believe God exists, then there’s no good reason to be skeptical about these events.

“However, let me add this: regarding the central miracle of the New Testament—the Resurrection—there is a very good case for concluding with confidence that, yes, this is really an event of history. You see, the evidence for the Resurrection is much, much stronger than the evidence, say, that Jesus did a miracle by healing the blind man in Jn.9. You have a wealth of data concerning the empty tomb, the Resurrection appearances, & the origin of the disciples’ belief in the Resurrection.”

“Isn’t it more likely that the accounts of Jesus’ miracles actually were legends that developed years after His life?” I asked. “Atheist George Smith says, ‘As one moves from the earlier to the later gospels, some of the miracles become more exaggerated.

‘He illustrates this legendary development by comparing Mk.1, which says *all* were brought to Jesus & *many* were healed; Mat.8, which says *many* were brought to Jesus & *all* were healed; & Lk.4, which says *all* were brought & *all* were healed. As historian Archibald Robertson said, ‘We are witnessing the progressive growth of a legend.’”

Craig got a sour look on his face. “That argument is really quite fanciful,” he said, “because the gospel writers don’t use the word ‘all’ or ‘many’ in the way a police report would.”

He pushed aside the Bultmann folder on his desk & reached for his Bible, opening it to the New Testament & running his finger down a page. Finding Mk.1:5, he read the verse aloud: “The whole Judean countryside & all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”

“Okay, think about that,” he said. “It says John the Baptist was baptizing all of Judea & Jerusalem. Really? All of Judea? All of Jerusalem?” Craig said, his voice rising in mock astonishment. “The *whole* province was emptied of people who went to the Jordan River & they were all baptized—all the infants, every elderly individual? Well, obviously not. This was not an expression that was meant to be read woodenly like a police report.

“Now, back to the accounts you mentioned earlier what is the central point they’re making? Clearly, that multitudes were going to Jesus for healings & exorcisms, & this is well attested. The fact is that all these accounts are in absolute agreement that there were miracles performed by Jesus & that this involved lots of people.”

He added one more point: “And it’s important to remember that for the greatest miracle, the Resurrection, we know from historical research that there was nowhere near enough time for legend to have developed & wiped out a solid core of historical truth.”

## The “Miracles” of Muhammad

Islamic tradition says Muhammad ascended to Heaven on a mule, that he healed the broken leg of a companion, that he fed large groups with little food, that he turned a tree branch into a steel sword, & that he

was responsible for other supernatural accomplishments.

“If he & Jesus both performed similar miracles,” I said to Craig, “then doesn’t that water down the uniqueness of Jesus & negate miracles as being evidence of His truth?”

Craig furrowed his brow. “I think this is based on a misimpression of Islam,” he said a bit tentatively. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but as I read the **Koran, essentially there aren’t any miracles, apart from the supposed miracle of the Koran itself.**”

“Granted,” I replied. “Except for a few disputed passages, I think scholars generally interpret the Koran that way. But I said these **miracles are reported in Islamic tradition, which is where they really proliferate.**”

“Exactly—the miracles are mentioned in the Hadith,” he said. “And here’s what’s important: this Islamic tradition comes hundreds of years after Muhammad’s life & therefore isn’t comparable to the gospels, which were **written down within the first generation when the eyewitnesses were still alive.**”

“For example, in 1Cor.15, the reports of Jesus’ resurrection appearances go back to within the first 5 years after the event. Consequently, this is fresh data that could have not been the result of legendary development. It’s simply not comparable to these legendary stories about Muhammad that accumulated many, many years later in Islamic tradition.

“**Muhammad never claimed any such miracles for himself.** Basically, these stories illustrate how non-historical reports arise by legendary influences over centuries of time, in contrast to the gospels, where miracle reports are part of the earliest strata of sources.”

### **The Personal Side of Miracles**

**My discussion with Craig had been stimulating so far, but it had remained exclusively on an intellectual plane. I wanted to get more personal, to probe beneath Craig’s scholarly persona & relate the issue of miracles to his individual life. But I hesitated.**

Through my years of acquaintance with Bill Craig, I had noticed some physical challenges he was facing. For instance, I could tell when we shook hands that his right hand was a bit gnarled. Out of politeness, I had never broached the subject with him. Now, as we explored this topic, his apparent ailment raised a troubling question that I could no longer ignore: **if God can perform miracles, why hasn’t He healed someone who is as devoted to Him as Bill Craig has been?**

I began slowly. “Look, Bill,” I said, “you believe God still does miracles, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t deny that miracles can happen today,” Craig said.

“Then tell me this,” I said gently. “If God loves you & He has the power to heal you, why doesn’t He make your physical afflictions disappear?”

Craig didn’t seem to be offended by the question. “Paul the Apostle had what he called ‘a thorn in his flesh’ that he asked God 3 times to remove,” Craig began, “and God’s answer was that His grace was sufficient & that His strength is made perfect in weakness. That passage has been a comfort to me in my own life.”

**He glanced off to the side, perhaps deciding how much to say. When he looked back at me, the sharp, steely intensity of his blue eyes had softened to a vulnerable sincerity.**

“I guess I don’t discuss this very much publicly,” he said, “but I have a congenital neuromuscular disease that causes progressive atrophy in the extremities. In my case it’s fairly light. A lot of people with this syndrome have to wear metal braces on their legs. They’re completely crippled. I’ve really been fortunate that mine hasn’t been very bad.”

“You’ve asked for a miracle?” I said.

He nodded. “As a young Christian I prayed that God would heal me. But He didn’t.”

Even though I could tell from his matter-of-fact tone that he wasn’t seeking pity, my heart went out to him. “You’re disappointed,” I said, my words coming out more like an observation than a question.

A slight smile came to his face. “Lee, **do you know what has amazed me?**” he asked with an unmistakable sense of wonder. “As I look at my life, God has used this disease in so many remarkable ways

to shape me & my personality. Because I couldn't do athletics, in order to succeed at something I was driven into academics. I really owe my existence as a scholar to my having this disease. It's what [compelled me to the life of the mind](#).

“And it also affected me psychologically by giving me a tremendous drive to succeed, which has helped me to do a lot in life. So I've really seen played out in a very personal way what Paul said—His strength is made perfect in weakness.”

“If you could have been healed, would you have wanted to be?”

He let out a laugh. “Well, *now* perhaps it would be nice, having learned the lessons!” he said.

Then he gave a more serious answer that echoed Peter Kreeft's earlier comments about suffering. “On the other hand, I've become quite accustomed to it. As I look back, I can honestly say that I am glad this was the way God directed my life. He can even use the bad things of life to bring about His ultimate purposes & ends.

“That doesn't mean those things aren't bad—they really are bad. But they're all within the sovereignty of God. Even good can come out of evil.”

### **Faith in a God of Miracles**

I asked Craig: “How do you see this interplay between faith & reason? Are the 2 really contradictory as critics contend?”

Craig began with a definition. “[Faith is trust or commitment to what you think is true](#),” he replied. “[Why a person thinks Christianity is true may differ from individual to individual](#). For one person, it might be because God speaks to his heart & produces in him a conviction this is true. I certainly believe that's valid.

“To another person, though, it [may be a more hard-headed intellectual exploration of the evidence that leads him to the same conclusion](#). But neither comes to faith until he makes that act of trust or commitment to what he thinks is true. When you understand faith in these categories, you can see it's entirely compatible with reason.”

When I asked Craig to elaborate, he thought for a minute & then offered an illustration from his own experience. He began, “I had corneal transplant surgery a while back,” but as soon as the words left his mouth, he let out a laugh. “My wife says I'm a walking medical disaster area,” he said with a chuckle, “but the healthiest person she knows!

“Anyway, before I was willing to let anyone operate on my eyes, Jan & I did a thorough search to find the best corneal surgeon in the country. We did research, we looked at the evidence, we contacted him, talked with him, & finally, after becoming convinced on the basis of the evidence he was the best, then I placed my trust in him & let him operate on my eyes. My faith or trust in him was based upon the good evidence that I had in his qualifications & credibility.

“In the same way, with respect to belief in God or miracles, many people make that act of trust or commitment after they have become convinced by the evidence that Christianity is true. Not everybody takes that route, but there are certainly people who do. And that's a logical & rational approach that uses reason rather than negates it.”

The subject of evidence opened the door to a fundamental issue that was begging to be explored. Time after time, Craig had referred to the fact that if God exists, then it's reasonable to believe that the miraculous is possible. And while that makes sense, to many people it hinges on a very big “if.”

“What affirmative evidence convinces you that such a miracle-working Being exists?” I asked. “Can you give me some solid reasons for believing in a divine Creator & the validity of Christianity?”

### **Reason #1: God Makes Sense of the Universe's Origin**

“Both philosophically & scientifically,” Craig said, “I would argue that the universe & time itself had a beginning at some point in the finite past. But since [something cannot just come out of nothing](#), there has to be a transcendent cause beyond space & time which brought the universe into being.”

“And the universe came into being in what has been called the Big Bang?” I asked.

“Exactly. As Stephen Hawking said, ‘Almost everyone now believes that the universe, & time itself, had a beginning at the Big Bang.’ Now, this poses a major problem for skeptics. As Anthony Kenny of Oxford University says, ‘A proponent of the Big Bang theory, at least if he is an atheist, must believe that the ... universe came from nothing & by nothing.’”

Craig chuckled. “Of course, something coming from nothing doesn’t make sense! Lee, you’ve been quoting the famous skeptic David Hume quite a bit in our interview. Well, even he said: ‘But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause.’

“Atheists recognize this. For example, one of contemporary philosophy’s most prominent atheists, Kai Nielsen, once said: ‘Suppose you suddenly hear a loud bang ... & you ask me, ‘What made that bang?’ & I reply, ‘Nothing, it just happened: You would not accept that.’

“And he’s absolutely correct. Yet think about it: if there must be a cause for a little bang, then doesn’t it also make sense that there would be a cause for a ‘big bang’?”

It was a question that didn’t seem to need a response. “So how would you summarize this initial argument?” I asked.

“First, whatever begins to exist has a cause. Second, the universe began to exist. And, third, therefore, the universe has a cause. As the eminent scientist Sir Arthur Eddington wrote: ‘The beginning seems to present insuperable difficulties unless we agree to look on it as frankly supernatural.’

I interrupted. “Okay, that points toward a Creator, but does it tell us much about Him?”

“Actually, yes, it does,” Craig replied. “We know this supernatural cause must be an uncaused, changeless, timeless, & immaterial being.”

“What’s the basis of your conclusions?”

“It must be uncaused because we know that there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. It must be timeless & therefore changeless, at least without the universe, because it was the Creator of time. In addition, because it also created space, it must transcend space & therefore be immaterial rather than physical in nature.”

## **Reason #2: God Makes Sense of the Universe’s Complexity**

“In the last 35 years,” Craig said, “scientists have been stunned to discover that the Big Bang was not some chaotic, primordial event, but rather a highly ordered event that required an enormous amount of information. In fact, from the very moment of its inception, the universe had to be fine-tuned to an incomprehensible precision for the existence of life like ourselves. And that points in a very compelling way toward the existence of an Intelligent Designer.

“Scientifically speaking, it’s far more probable for a *life-prohibiting* universe to exist than a *life-sustaining* one. Life is balanced on a razor’s edge.”

As an example, he cited Hawking’s writings. “He has calculated,” Craig said, “that if the rate of the universe’s expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, the universe would have collapsed into a fireball.”

In short order, Craig proceeded to go down a list of several other mind-boggling statistics to support his conclusion. Among them:

British physicist P.C. Davies has concluded the odds against the initial conditions being suitable for the formation of stars—a necessity for planets & thus life—is a one followed by at least a thousand billion billion zeroes.

Davies also estimated that if the strength of gravity or of the weak force were changed by only one part in a ten followed by 100 zeroes, life could never have developed.

There are about **50 constants & quantities**—for example, the amount of usable energy in the universe, the difference in mass between protons & neutrons, the ratios of the fundamental forces of nature, & the

proportion of matter to antimatter—that **must be balanced to a mathematically infinitesimal degree for any life to be possible.**

“All of this,” said Craig, “amply supports the conclusion that there’s an Intelligence behind Creation. **In fact, the alternate explanations just don’t add up.**”

I interrupted to raise a different scenario that sounded plausible on the surface. “What about the possibility that the fine-tuning of the universe is the result of pure chance?” I asked. “Maybe the whole thing is merely a big cosmic accident—a colossal roll of the dice, so to speak.”

Craig sighed. “Lee, **I’ll tell you this: the precision is so utterly fantastic, so mathematically breathtaking, that it’s just plain silly to think it could have been an accident. Especially since we’re not just talking about simple odds but what theorists call ‘specified probability,’ which rules out chance beyond a reasonable doubt.**”

I wasn’t ready to abandon the option of chance. “What if there were an infinite number of other universes existing apart from ours?” I asked. “Then the odds would be that one of them would have the right conditions for sustaining life—& that’s the one in which we happen to find ourselves.”

Craig had heard that theory before. “It’s called the Many Worlds Hypothesis,” he said. “Hawking has talked about this concept. Here’s the problem: these other theoretical universes are inaccessible to us & therefore there’s no possible way to provide any evidence that this might be true. It’s purely a concept, an idea, without scientific proof. The prominent British scientist & theologian John Polkinghorne has **called it ‘pseudo-science’ & ‘a metaphysical guess.’**

“This is pure metaphysics. There’s **no real reason to believe such parallel worlds exist. The very fact that skeptics have to come up with such an outlandish theory is because the fine-tuning of the universe points powerfully toward an Intelligent Designer—& some people will hypothesize anything to avoid reaching that conclusion.**”

I knew that this astonishingly precise balance of the universe was one of the main factors in leading Harvard-educated Patrick Glynn, the Associate Director & Scholar-in-Residence at the George Washington University Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, to abandon atheism & become a Christian. In his **book *God: The Evidence*, he shoots holes in such other alternate theories as quantum mechanics & “baby universes,” coming to this conclusion:**

Today, the **concrete data point strongly in the direction of the God hypothesis.... Those who wish to oppose it have no testable theory** to marshal, only speculations about unseen universes **spun from fertile imagination....** Ironically, the picture of the universe bequeathed to us by the most advanced 20<sup>th</sup>-century science is closer in spirit to the vision presented in the Book of Genesis than anything offered by science since Copernicus.

### **Reason #3: God Makes Sense of Objective Moral Values**

Craig summarized his next point succinctly at the outset: “A third factor pointing toward God is the existence of objective moral values in the universe. If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.”

That, of course, raised the question of what he meant by “objective” values. Craig was quick to add both a definition & an illustration.

“**Objective moral values are valid & binding independently of whether anyone believes in them or not,**” he explained. “For example, to **label the Holocaust objectively wrong is to say it was wrong even though the Nazis thought that it was right. And it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won WWII & succeeded in brainwashing or exterminating everybody who disagreed with them. Now, if God does not exist, then moral values are not objective in this way.**”

I was shaking my head. “Wait a second,” I interjected. “If you’re saying that an atheist can’t have moral values or live a basically ethical life, then I have a problem with that. I have a friend who doesn’t

believe in God, & he's as kind & caring an individual as many of the Christians I know."

"No, I'm not saying a person must believe in God in order to live a moral life. The question is, 'If God does not exist, do objective moral values exist?' And the answer is, 'No.'"

"Why not?"

"Because if there is no God, then moral values are merely the products of socio-biological evolution. In fact, that's what many atheists think. According to philosopher Michael Ruse: 'Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands & feet & teeth,' & morality is 'just an aid to survival & reproduction ... any deeper meaning is illusory.'

"Or if there is no God, then morality is just a matter of personal taste, akin to statements like, 'Broccoli tastes good.' Well, it tastes good to some people but bad to others. There isn't any objective truth about that; it's a subjective matter of taste. And to say that killing innocent children is wrong would just be an expression of taste, saying, 'I don't like the killing of innocent children.'

"After all, if there is no God, then what's so special about human beings? They're just accidental byproducts of nature that have only recently evolved on a tiny speck of dust lost somewhere in a mindless universe & are doomed to perish forever in a relatively short time.

"In the atheistic view, some action, like rape, may not be socially advantageous, & therefore it has become taboo in the course of human development. But that doesn't prove that rape is really wrong. In fact, it's conceivable that rape could have evolved as something that's advantageous for the survival of the species. Thus, without God there is no absolute right & wrong which imposes itself on our conscience.

"However, we all know deep down that, in fact, objective moral values *do* exist. All we have to do to see that is to simply ask ourselves: 'Is torture ... for fun really a morally neutral act?' I'm persuaded you'd say, 'No, that's not morally neutral; it's really wrong to do that.' And you'll say that in full cognizance of the Darwinian theory of evolution & all the rest.

"A good illustration of this is a fundraising letter sent out in 1991 by John Healey, the executive director of Amnesty International, in which he said: 'I am writing you today because I think you share my profound belief that there are indeed some moral absolutes. When it comes to torture, to government-sanctioned murder, to 'disappearances' ... these are outrages against all of us.'

"Actions like rape aren't just behaviors that happen to be socially unacceptable—they are clearly moral abominations. They are objectively wrong. And such things as love, equality, & self-sacrifice really are good in an objective sense. We all know these things deep down.

"And since these objective moral values cannot exist without God & they unquestionably do exist, then it follows logically & inescapably that God exists."

#### **Reason #4: God Makes Sense of the Resurrection**

With this point, Craig said he was going to switch gears a bit. "We've been saying that if we have good reasons to believe in God, then we can believe in miracles," he said. "I've been giving reasons that point toward God's existence. But miracles themselves also can be part of the cumulative case for God. That's true, for instance, of the Resurrection. If Jesus of Nazareth really did come back from the dead, then we have a divine miracle on our hands & thus, evidence for the existence of God."

I asked Craig to recap why he believes the historical evidence points toward that conclusion—"But," I stressed, "don't assume that the New Testament is the inspired Word of God." He agreed for the sake of his answer to consider the New Testament to be merely a collection of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Greek documents that can be subjected to analysis like any other ancient records.

"There are at least 4 facts about the fate of Jesus that are widely accepted by New Testament historians from a broad spectrum," Craig began. "The first is that after Jesus was crucified, he was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. This is important because it means the location of the tomb was known to Jew, Christian, & Roman alike."

"What evidence do you have for this?" I asked.

"Jesus' burial is reported in extremely old information that Paul included in his first letter to the

church in Corinth. This [information can be dated to within 5 years after Jesus' death](#), so it wasn't legendary. Further, the burial story is part of very old material that Mark used in writing his gospel, & his story lacks signs of legendary development. There are no traces of any competing burial story. What's more, it would be inexplicable for anyone to make up Joseph's involvement, since he was a member of the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus.

"The second fact is that on the Sunday after the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers. This is substantiated by Paul's early report to the Corinthians, which implies the empty tomb, & by Mark's very old source material. So again we have early, independent attestation.

"And we have a lot more. For instance, the empty-tomb story lacks signs of legendary embellishment, & the earliest known Jewish response to the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection presupposes that His tomb was empty. [In addition, it's reported that women discovered the tomb empty. Now, the testimony of women was considered so unreliable that they couldn't testify in Jewish courts.](#) The only reason to include the [highly embarrassing detail](#) that women discovered the empty tomb is that the gospel writers were faithfully recording what really happened.

"The third fact is that on multiple occasions & under various circumstances, different individuals & groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead. This is almost universally acknowledged by New Testament scholars for several reasons.

"For example, the list of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection, provided by Paul to the Corinthians, guarantees that such appearances occurred. Given the early date of the information & Paul's own acquaintance with the people involved, this cannot be dismissed as legendary.

"Also, the appearance narratives in the gospels provide multiple, independent attestation of the appearances. Even the skeptical New Testament critic Gerd Ludemann has concluded: 'It may be taken as historically certain that Peter & the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.'

"The fourth fact is that the original disciples [suddenly & sincerely came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their predisposition to the contrary.](#) Jewish beliefs precluded anyone's rising from the dead before the general resurrection at the end of the world. Even so, the original disciples suddenly came to believe so strongly that God had raised Jesus that they were [willing to die for that belief.](#) New Testament scholar Luke Johnson said: 'Some sort of powerful, transformative experience is required to generate the sort of movement earliest Christianity was.'"

"Okay, then," I said, "what do you think is the best explanation for these 4 facts?"

"Frankly, there is absolutely no naturalistic explanation that fits," he replied. "All of the old theories like 'the disciples stole the body' or 'Jesus wasn't really dead' have been universally rejected by modern scholarship.

"Personally, I think the very best explanation is the same one provided by the eyewitnesses: that God raised Jesus from the dead. In fact, this hypothesis [easily passes all 6 tests that historians use in determining what is the best explanation for a given body of historical facts.](#)"

### **Reason #5: God Can Immediately Be Experienced**

Craig said that this last point was not so much an argument for God's existence, "but rather it's the claim that you can know that God exists wholly apart from arguments by having an immediate experience of Him."

Craig looked straight at me. "Lee, let me illustrate this concept with a question," he said. "Can you prove that the external world exists?"

The question caught me off guard. I thought about it for a moment & could come up with no logical sequence of arguments that would incontrovertibly establish such a thing. "I'm not sure how I would go about doing that," I conceded.

"That's right," he replied. "[You can't prove that the external world exists. After all, you could be a brain in a vat being stimulated with electrodes by a mad scientist so that you just think you're seeing an](#)

external world. But you'd have to be crazy to think that. So this belief in the external world is entirely rational. In other words, it's appropriately grounded in our experience, & what scientists call a properly basic belief.

"In the same way, in the context of an immediate experience of God, it's rational to believe in God in a properly basic way. And I've had such an experience. God invaded my life as a 16-year-old, & for more than 30 years I've walked with Him day by day, year by year, as a living reality in my experience.

"In the absence of overwhelming arguments for atheism, it seems to me perfectly rational to go on believing in the reality of that experience. This is the way people in biblical days knew God. As John Hick wrote: 'To them God was not a proposition completing a syllogism, or an idea adopted by the mind, but the experiential reality which gave significance to their lives.'

"But," I interjected, "what if an atheist says the same thing—that he has a 'properly basic belief' in the absence of God? Then you're deadlocked."

Replied Craig: "Philosopher William Alston says that in that case, the Christian should do whatever is feasible to find common ground, like logic or empirical facts, to show in a noncircular way whose view is correct.

"That's what I've tried to do in these other 4 arguments. I know God exists in a properly basic way, & I've tried to show He exists by appealing to the common facts of science, ethics, history, & philosophy. Taken together, they form a powerful case for God & Christianity."

### **A Knock on the Door**

"As you sit here right now, deep in your soul, do you know for a fact that Christianity is true?" I asked.

Without hesitating, he replied, "Yes, I do."

"Ultimately, how do you know for sure?"

"Ultimately, the way a Christian really knows that Christianity is true is through the witness of God's Spirit," he said. "The Holy Spirit whispers to our spirit that we belong to God. Other evidence, though still valid, is basically confirmatory.

"Let's say you're going to the office to see if your boss is in. You see his car in the parking lot. You ask the secretary if he's in, & she says, 'Yes, I just spoke with him.' You see light from under his office door. You listen & hear his voice on the telephone. On the basis of all this evidence, you have good grounds for concluding that your boss is in his office.

"But you could do something quite different. You could go to the door & knock on it & meet the boss face-to-face. At that point, the evidence of the car in the parking lot, the secretary's testimony, the light under the door, the voice on the telephone—all of that would still be valid, but it would take a secondary role, because now you've met the boss face-to-face.

"And in the same way, when we've met God, so to speak, face-to-face, all of the arguments & evidence for His existence—though still perfectly valid—take a secondary role. They now become confirmatory of what God Himself has shown us in a supernatural way through the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts."

"And this immediate experience of God is available to anyone who seeks it?"

"Absolutely. The Bible says God is knocking on the door of our life, & if we open it we will encounter him & experience Him personally. He says in Rev.3:20: 'Here I am! I stand at the door & knock. If anyone hears My voice & opens the door, I will go in & eat with him, & he with Me.'"

Craig gestured toward the tape recorder that had been capturing our conversation. "We've been talking a lot about miracles today," he said in conclusion. "It's no exaggeration to say that knowing God personally & seeing Him change lives are the greatest miracles of all."

I reached over & clicked off the recorder. Because of my own experience with God after years of living in the mire of immorality as an atheist, I knew he was right.

Based on how God has transformed my life, my attitudes, my relationships, my motivations, my



marriage, & my priorities through His very real ongoing presence in my life, I realized at that moment that miracles like manna from Heaven, the virgin birth, & the Resurrection—well, in the end, they're child's play for a God like that.

### **OBJECTION: EVOLUTION EXPLAINS LIFE, SO GOD ISN'T NEEDED**

Investigators were desperately searching for some piece of physical evidence to link suspect Ronald Keith Williamson to a brutal slaying that had shocked the tranquil community of Ada, Oklahoma, 3 years earlier.

Finally, detectives came up with the clincher. An expert took 4 hairs that had been found on the victim's body & elsewhere at the crime scene, examined them under a microscope, & concluded they were "a match" with samples taken from Williamson, according to a newspaper report. Their case bolstered by scientific evidence, investigators arrested Williamson & put him on trial.

It didn't take long for a jury to find the former minor league baseball player guilty of the slaying & to dispatch him to Death Row. With the ghastly crime finally solved, the people of Ada breathed a collective sigh of relief. Justice had been done.

There was, however, one big problem: Williamson was telling the truth about his innocence. After he languished in prison for 12 years—9 of them awaiting execution—an analysis of DNA at the crime scene established that someone else had committed the murder. On 15Apr99, Williamson was finally set free.

But wait a second—what about the hair-comparison evidence that pointed toward Williamson's guilt? The answer is disconcerting: hair evidence often purports to prove more than it actually does.

The newspaper report had glossed over some important nuances. The hair from the scene didn't really "match" Williamson's. A criminologist had merely concluded they were "consistent" with each other. In other words, their color, shape, & texture looked similar. Thus, the hairs from the crime scene could have come from Williamson—or perhaps they could have come from someone else.

Far from being as incriminating as fingerprints, hair analysis has been called "pseudo-science" by some legal analysts. Often jurors hear impressive-sounding testimony about what appears to be scientifically valid proof, & they conclude—incorrectly—that it establishes the defendant's guilt.

In the case of Williamson, a federal judge called the hair evidence "scientifically unreliable" & said it never should have been used against the defendant. Even more troubling, hair evidence had been used against 18 Death Row prisoners who subsequently were declared innocent in the last quarter-century.

The case of Williamson is an eye-opening example of justice gone awry. His unwarranted conviction demonstrates how easy it is for jurors to draw sweeping conclusions that aren't really justified by the actual scientific facts. And in a sense, Williamson's story paralleled my own investigation into one of the most potent bits of scientific evidence that's commonly used against the existence of God.

### **Darwin's Accomplishment**

Although there was much that led up to it, I guess you could say I lost the last remnants of my faith in God during biology class in high school. So profound was the experience that I could take you back to the very seat where I was sitting when I first was taught that evolution explained the origin & development of life. The implications were clear: Charles Darwin's theory eliminated the need for a supernatural Creator by demonstrating how naturalistic processes could account for the increasing complexity & diversity of living things.

My experience was not uncommon. Scholar Patrick Glynn has described how he took a similar path that ended up in atheism:

I embraced skepticism at an early age, when I first learned of Darwin's theory of evolution in, of all

places, Catholic grade school. It immediately occurred to me that either Darwin's theory was true or the Creation story in the Book of Genesis was true. They could not both be true, & I stood up in class & told the poor nun as much. Thus began a long odyssey away from the devout religious belief & practice that had marked my childhood toward an increasingly secular & rationalistic outlook.

In the popular culture, the case for evolution is generally considered shut. "Darwinism remains one of the most successful scientific theories ever promulgated," *Time* magazine said in its recap of the second millennium. To Charles Templeton, it's [simply beyond dispute that "all life is the result of timeless evolutionary forces."](#)

But is Darwinism true? I walked away from my formal education convinced it was. As my spiritual journey began taking me into the realm of science, however, I started to have an increasingly uneasy feeling. Like the hair-comparison evidence in the Williamson case, did the evidence for evolution purport to prove more than it actually does?

[The more I investigated the issue, the more I saw how I had glossed over significant nuances in a rush to judgment](#), reminiscent of the Oklahoma murder trial. When I examined the matter thoroughly, I began to question whether the sweeping conclusions of Darwinisms are really justified by the hard scientific facts. (A similar journey, incidentally, helped lead Glynn back to faith in God.)

This is [not, I soon discovered, a case of religion versus science](#); rather, this is an issue of science versus science. More & more biologists, biochemists, & other researchers—not just Christians—have raised [serious objections to evolutionary theory](#) in recent years, claiming that [its broad inferences are sometimes based on flimsy, incomplete, or flawed data](#).

In other words, what [looks at first blush like an airtight scientific case for evolution begins to unravel](#) upon closer examination. New discoveries during the past 30 years have prompted an increasing number of scientists to contradict Darwin by concluding that there was an Intelligent Designer behind the Creation & development of life.

"The result of these cumulative efforts to investigate the cell—to investigate life at the molecular level—is a loud, clear, piercing cry of 'design!'" biochemist Michael Behe of Lehigh University said in his ground-breaking critique of Darwinism. He went on to say:

The [conclusion of Intelligent Design flows naturally from the data itself—not from sacred books or sectarian beliefs](#).... The reluctance of science to embrace the conclusion of Intelligent Design . . . has no justifiable foundation.... Many people, including many important & well-respected scientists, just don't *want* there to be anything beyond nature.

That last sentence described me. I was [more than happy to latch onto Darwinism as an excuse to jettison the idea of God so I could unabashedly pursue my own agenda in life without moral constraints](#).

Yet someone who knows me well once described me as being "a sucker for the truth." My [training in journalism & law compels me to dig beneath opinion, speculation, & theories, all the way down until I hit the bedrock of solid facts](#). And try as I might, I couldn't turn my back on nagging inconsistencies that were undermining the foundation of Darwin's theory.

### **A Primordial Detective Story**

Everyone concedes that evolution is true to some extent. Undeniably, there are variations within species of animals & plants, which explains why there are more than 200 different varieties of dogs, cows can be bred for improved milk production, & bacteria can adapt & develop immunity to antibiotics. This is called "microevolution."

But Darwin's theory goes much further than that, claiming that life began millions of years ago with simple single-cell creatures & then developed through mutation & natural selection into the vast array of plant & animal life that populate the planet. Human beings came on the scene from the same common

ancestor as the ape. Scientists call this more controversial theory “macro-evolution.”

Initially troubling to me was the [paucity of fossil evidence for the transitions](#) between various species of animals. Even Darwin conceded that the lack of these fossils “is perhaps [the most obvious & serious objection](#)” to his theory, although he confidently predicted that future discoveries would vindicate him.

Fast forward to 1979. David Raup, the curator of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, said:

We are now about 120 years after Darwin & the knowledge of the fossil record has been greatly expanded. We now have a quarter of a million fossil species, but the situation hasn’t changed much.... We have even fewer examples of evolutionary transition than we had in Darwin’s time.

[What the fossil record \*does\* show is that in rocks dated back some 570 million years, there is the sudden appearance of nearly all the animal phyla, & they appear fully formed](#), “without a trace of the evolutionary ancestors that Darwinists require.” It’s a phenomenon that points more readily toward a Creator than Darwinism.

That isn’t the only argument against evolution. In his book *Origin of Species*, Darwin also admitted: “If it could be [demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, then my theory would absolutely break down](#).” Taking up that challenge, [Behe’s award-winning book \*Darwin’s Black Box\*](#) showed how recent biochemical discoveries have found [numerous examples of this very kind of “irreducible complexity.”](#)

I was particularly interested in a more fundamental issue, however. Biological evolution can only take place after there was some sort of living matter that could replicate itself & then grow in complexity through mutation & survival of the fittest. I wanted to go back even further & ask the cornerstone question of human existence: Where did life begin in the first place?

The origin of life has intrigued both theologians & scientists for centuries. “[The most amazing thing to me is existence itself](#),” said cosmologist Allan Sandage. “[How is it that inanimate matter can organize itself to contemplate itself?](#)”

[How, indeed?](#) Darwin’s theory presupposes that nonliving chemicals, if given the right amount of time & circumstances, could develop by themselves into living matter. Undeniably, that view has gained widespread popular acceptance through the years. But are there any scientific data to back up that belief? Or, like the hair-comparison evidence in the Oklahoma murder trial, is that [analysis long on speculation but short on hard facts?](#)

This primordial detective story took me on a journey to Houston, Texas, where I rented a car & drove through the countryside & cattle ranches to the community of College Station, home of Texas A&M University. Down the block from the school, in a modest 2-story frame house, I knocked on the door of one of the most influential experts on how life arose on primitive planet Earth.

#### **INTERVIEW: WALTER L. BRADLEY, PH.D.**

Walter Bradley caused a stir in 1984 when he coauthored the seminal book, *The Mystery of Life’s Origin*, which was a devastating analysis of theories about how living matter was created. Eyebrows were raised because its foreword was written by biologist Dean Kenyon of San Francisco State University, whose book *Biological Predestination* had previously argued that chemicals had an inherent ability to evolve into living cells under the right conditions. Calling Bradley’s book “cogent, original, & compelling,” Kenyon concluded: “The authors believe, & I now concur, that there is a [fundamental flaw in all current theories of the chemical origins of life](#).”

Since then, Bradley has written & spoken widely on the topic of how life began. He received his [doctorate in materials science](#) from the University of Texas at Austin & was a [professor of mechanical engineering](#) at Texas A&M University for 24 years, serving as head of the department for 4 years. An [expert on polymers & thermodynamics](#), both of which are critically important in the life-origin debate, Bradley has

been director of the Polymer Technology Center at Texas A&M & has received research grants totaling \$4 million.

He has consulted with such corporations as Dow Chemical, 3M, B.F. Goodrich, General Dynamics, Boeing, & Shell Oil, & has been an expert witness in about 75 legal cases. In addition, he is a fellow of the Discovery Institute's Center for the Renewal of Science & Culture & has been elected a fellow of the American Society for Materials & the American Scientific Affiliation.

As a scientist concerned with accuracy, Bradley answers questions in careful & complete sentences, making sure to acknowledge nuances & not to overstate his conclusions. He talks respectfully of the evolutionists he has debated through the years, including renowned chemistry professor Robert Shapiro of NY University, who called *The Mystery of Life's Origin* "an important contribution" that "brings together the major scientific arguments that demonstrate the inadequacy of current theories."

Just 3 months after his retirement from Texas A&M, the 56-year-old Bradley was relaxed & genial as we sat down at his dining room table. It was clear from the outset that he had come prepared for our discussion: a pile of research papers was neatly stacked next to him. Ever the scientist, he wanted to be able to back up everything he said.

To lay some groundwork, I started our conversation by going back to Darwin himself. "His theory of evolution sought to explain how simple life forms could develop over long periods of time into increasingly complex creatures," I said. "But that ignores the important issue of how life arose in the first place. What was Darwin's theory about that?"

Bradley picked up a book as he began to answer. "Well, he didn't really have a good idea of how life arose," Bradley said. "In 1871 he wrote a letter in which he did some speculation—it wasn't even a hypothesis, just some brainstorming." With that, Bradley read Darwin's words:

It is often said that all the conditions for the first production of a living organism are now present which could ever have been present. But if (& oh! what a big if!) we could conceive in some warm little pond, with all sorts of ammonia & phosphoric salts, light, heat, electricity, etc. present, that a protein compound was chemically formed ready to undergo still more complex changes, at the present day such matter would be instantly devoured or absorbed, which would not have been the case before living creatures were formed.

Closing the book, Bradley said, "So Darwin was the first one to theorize that life emerged from chemicals reacting in some 'warm little pond.'"

"He makes it sound pretty easy," I remarked.

"Darwin may have underestimated the problem because it was widely thought back then that life sort of naturally develops every place," he replied. "People thought maggots would spontaneously develop from decaying meat. But simultaneous with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Francesco Redi demonstrated that meat that was kept away from flies never developed maggots. Then Louis Pasteur showed that air contains microorganisms that can multiply in water, giving the illusion of the spontaneous generation of life. He announced at the Sorbonne in Paris that 'never will the doctrine of spontaneous generation recover from the mortal blow of this simple experiment.'

"But then in the 1920s, some scientists said they agreed with Pasteur that spontaneous genesis doesn't happen in a short time frame. But they theorized that if you had billions & billions of years—as the late astronomer Carl Sagan liked to say—then it might really happen after all."

"And that," I concluded, "is the basis for the idea that nonliving chemicals can combine into living cells if given enough time."

"That's exactly right," he said.

## **Building Blocks of Life**

I told Bradley that in high school & college I was taught that the primitive earth was covered with

pools of chemicals & had an atmosphere that was conducive to the formation of life. With energy supplied by lightning, chemicals in this “prebiotic soup”—over a period of billions of years—linked together & a simple life form emerged. From there, evolution took over.

“Who conceptualized that scenario?” I asked.

“Russian biochemist Alexander Oparin proposed in 1924 that complex molecular arrangements & the functions of living matter evolved from simpler molecules that preexisted on the early earth,” he said. “Then in 1928, British biologist J.B. Haldane theorized that UV light acting on the earth’s primitive atmosphere caused sugars & amino acids to concentrate in the oceans, & then life eventually emerged from this primordial broth.

“Later Nobel Prize winner Harold Urey suggested that earth’s primitive atmosphere would have made it favorable for organic compounds to have emerged. Urey was the Ph.D. advisor to Stanley Miller at the University of Chicago, & it was Miller who decided to test this experimentally.”

Miller’s name rang a bell. I remember being taught in school about his landmark experiment in which he recreated the atmosphere of the primitive earth in a laboratory & shot electricity through it to simulate the effects of lightning. Before long, he found that amino acids—the building blocks of life—had been created. I can remember my biology teacher recounting the experiment with an infectious enthusiasm, suggesting it proved conclusively that life could have emerged from nonliving chemicals.

“This experiment was hailed as a major breakthrough at the time, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Oh, absolutely!” Bradley declared. “Sagan called it the single most significant step in convincing many scientists that life is likely to be abundant in the cosmos. Chemist William Day said the experiment showed that this first step in the creation of life was not a chance event, but it was inevitable. Astronomer Harlow Shapley said Miller had proven that ‘the appearance of life is essentially an automatic biochemical development that comes along naturally when physical conditions are right.’

“For a while, evolutionists were euphoric. But there was a major problem with the experiment that has invalidated its results.”

I had never been taught anything in school about the Miller experiment being fatally flawed. “What was the problem?” I asked.

“Miller & Oparin didn’t have any real proof that the earth’s early atmosphere was composed of ammonia, methane, & hydrogen, which Miller used in his experiment. They based their theory on physical chemistry. They wanted to get a chemical reaction that would be favorable, & so they proposed that the atmosphere was rich in those gases. Oparin was smart enough to know that if you start with inert gases like nitrogen & carbon dioxide, they won’t react.”

“Are you saying that the deck was stacked in advance to get the results they wanted?” I asked, incredulity in my voice.

“Essentially, yes,” he replied.

“What was the real environment of the early earth like?” I asked.

“From 1980 on, NASA scientists have shown that the primitive earth never had any methane, ammonia, or hydrogen to amount to anything,” he said. “Instead, it was composed of water, carbon dioxide, & nitrogen & you absolutely cannot get the same experimental results with that mixture. It just won’t work. More recent experiments have confirmed this to be the case.”

I slumped back in my chair, amazed at the implications of what Bradley had disclosed. My mind flashed back to my biology teacher, who seemed so utterly confident that Miller’s experiment validated the chemical evolution of life. Now new discoveries have changed everything—& yet there are generations of former students still living under the impression that the origin of life issue has been resolved.

“So the scientific significance of Miller’s experiment today . . .,” I began, prompting Bradley to finish my sentence.

“ . . . is zilch,” he said. “When textbooks present the Miller experiment, they should be honest enough to say it was interesting historically but not terribly relevant to how life actually developed.”

## Assembling a Cell

Before we went any further, I thought it would be important to understand some fundamentals about living matter to determine whether it's reasonable to believe it could have been the product of unguided chemical reactions.

"Let's start by defining the difference between a living system & one that's not living," I said to Bradley.

"A **living system must do at least 3 things: process energy, store information, & replicate,**" he said. "All living systems do that. Human beings do these 3 functions, although bacteria do them much more quickly & efficiently. Nonliving things don't do them."

Again thinking back to Darwin's day, I asked, "Did Darwin consider basic living matter—say, for instance, a one-cell organism—to be rather simple?"

"Yes, he undoubtedly would have," came his response. "Darwin didn't think it would be very difficult to create life from non-life because the gap between the 2 didn't appear very great to him. In 1905, Ernst Haeckel described living cells as being merely 'homogeneous globules of plasm.' In those days they didn't have any way of seeing the complexity that exists within the membrane of the cell. But the truth is that a one-cell organism is more complicated than anything we've been able to recreate through supercomputers.

"One person very creatively—but quite accurately—described a single-cell organism as a high-tech factory, complete with artificial languages & decoding systems; central memory banks that store & retrieve impressive amounts of information; precision control systems that regulate the automatic assembly of components; proofreading & quality control mechanisms that safeguard against errors; assembly systems that use principles of prefabrication & modular construction; & a complete replication system that allows the organism to duplicate itself at bewildering speeds."

"That's extremely impressive," I said. "But maybe one-cell organisms are more complicated today due to the fact that they have developed & evolved through the eons. Maybe the first cells produced on the primitive earth were much more basic & therefore easier to create."

"Let's accept that theory," came Bradley's reply. "But even when you try to imagine what the minimal living cell would have been like, it's still not simple at all."

"What would go into building a living organism?" I asked—and then, before Bradley could open his mouth to reply, I quickly added: "And keep it basic."

"Okay," he said, clearing his throat. "Essentially, you start with amino acids. They come in 80 different types, but only 20 of them are found in living organisms. The trick, then, is to isolate only the correct amino acids. Then the right amino acids have to be linked together in the right sequence in order to produce protein molecules. Picture those plastic stick-together chains that kids play with—you have to put together the right amino acids in the right way to ultimately get biological function."

Imagining kids playing with plastic toys made the process seem—well, like child's play. "That doesn't sound very difficult," I said.

"It wouldn't be if you were applying your intelligence to the problem & purposefully selecting & assembling the amino acids one at a time. But, remember, this is chemical evolution. It would be unguided by any outside help. And there are a lot of other complicating factors to consider."

"Such as what?"

"For instance, other molecules tend to react more readily with amino acids than amino acids react with each other. Now you have the problem of how to eliminate these extraneous molecules. Even in the Miller experiment, only 2% of the material he produced was composed of amino acids, so you'd have a lot of other chemical material that would gum up the process.

"Then there's another complication: there are an equal number of amino acids that are right- & left-handed, & only left-handed ones work in living matter. Now you've got to get only these select ones to link together in the right sequence. And you also need the correct kind of chemical bonds—namely, peptide bonds—in the correct places in order for the protein to be able to fold in a specific 3-dimensional way. Otherwise, it won't function.

“It’s sort of like a printer taking letters out of a basket & setting type the way they used to do it by hand. If you guide it with your intelligence, it’s no problem. But if you just choose letters at random & put them together haphazardly—including upside down & backwards—then what are the chances you’d get words, sentences, & paragraphs that would make sense? It’s extremely unlikely.

“In the same way, perhaps **100 amino acids have to be put together in just the right manner to make a protein molecule. And, remember, that’s just the first step. Creating one protein molecule doesn’t mean you’ve created life. Now you have to bring together a collection of protein molecules—maybe 200 of them—with just the right functions to get a typical living cell.**”

**Whew! Now I was beginning to see the enormity of the challenge.** Even if Miller had been right about the ease with which amino acids could be produced in the primitive earth’s atmosphere, nevertheless the process of putting them together into protein molecules & then assembling those into a functioning cell would be mind-boggling.

“In living systems,” continued Bradley, “the guidance that’s needed to assemble everything comes from DNA. Every cell of every plant & animal has to have a **DNA molecule. Think of it as a little microprocessor that regulates everything.** DNA works hand-in-glove with RNA to direct the correct sequencing of amino acids. It’s able to do this through biochemical instructions—that is, information—that is encoded on the DNA.”

That raised an obvious issue. “Where did the DNA come from?” I asked.

“The **making of DNA & RNA would be an even greater problem than creating protein,**” he replied. “These are **much more complex, & there are a host of practical problems.** For instance, the synthesis of key building blocks for DNA & RNA has never been successfully done except under highly implausible conditions without any resemblance to those of the early earth. Klaus Dose of the Institute for Biochemistry in Mainz, Germany, admitted that the difficulties in synthesizing DNA & RNA ‘are at present beyond our imagination.’

“Frankly, the origin of such a sophisticated system that is both rich in information & capable of reproducing itself has absolutely stymied origin-of-life scientists. As the Nobel Prize-winner Sir Francis Crick said, ‘The origin of life appears to be almost a miracle, so many are the conditions which would have had to be satisfied to get it going.’

“The mathematical odds of assembling a living organism are so astronomical that nobody still believes that random chance accounts for the origin of life. Even if you optimized the conditions, it wouldn’t work. If you took **all the carbon in the universe & put it on the face of the earth, allowed it to chemically react at the most rapid rate possible, & left it for a billion years, the odds of creating just one functional protein molecule would be one chance in a 10 with 60 zeroes after it.**”

Those odds are so infinitesimal that the human mind can’t comprehend them. “That makes winning the lottery look like a sure thing,” I quipped.

“Absolutely. Behe has said the **probability of linking together just 100 amino acids to create one protein molecule by chance would be the same as a blind folded man finding one marked grain of sand somewhere in the vastness of the Sahara Desert—& doing it not just once, but 3 different times.** Sir Frederick Hoyle put it colorfully when he said that this scenario is **about as likely as a tornado whirling through a junkyard & accidentally assembling a fully functional Boeing 747.**

“In other words, the odds for all practical purposes are zero. That’s why even though some people who aren’t educated in this field still believe life emerged by chance, scientists simply don’t believe it anymore.”

### **The Most Reasonable Inference**

Time after time, **origin-of-life scientists have come up empty when they’ve tried to theorize how chemicals could evolve into living matter.** Recently, some have used computer models to try to show how chemical reactions might have occurred on the primitive earth, but these scenarios only work if the computer is programmed to eliminate some of the insurmountable obstacles that chemicals would have actually faced

in the real world.

When a scientist at the Santa Fe Institute, where some computer simulations have been conducted, commented, “If Darwin had a computer on his desk, who knows what he could have discovered,” origin-of-life expert John Horgan wryly remarked, “What indeed: Charles Darwin might have discovered a great deal about computers & very little about nature.”

I asked Bradley for his personal assessment of the state of research into how life emerged.

“There isn’t any doubt that science, for the moment at least, is at a dead end,” he replied. “The optimism of the 1950s is gone. The mood at the 1999 international conference on origin of life was described as grim—full of frustration, pessimism, & desperation. Nobody pretends that any alternative provides a reasonable path of how life went unguided from simple chemicals to proteins to basic life forms.”

Bradley reached over to a book & quickly located the quote he was after. “Klaus Dose, the biochemist who’s considered one of the foremost experts in this area, summed up the situation pretty well,” Bradley said, reading his words:

More than 30 years of experimentation on the origin of life in the fields of chemical & molecular evolution have led to a better perception of the immensity of the problem of the origin of life on Earth rather than to its solution. At present all discussions on principal theories & experiments in the field either end in stalemate or in a confession of ignorance.

Continued Bradley: “Shapiro argues strongly that ‘all current theories are bankrupt.’ Crick said out of frustration, ‘Every time I write a paper on the origin of life, I swear I will never write another one, because there is too much speculation running after too few facts.’ Even Miller, some 40 years after his famous experiment, said in a great understatement to *Scientific American*. ‘The problem of the origin of life has turned out to be much more difficult than I, & most other people, envisioned.’”

“What,” I said, “is your own best hypothesis?”

“If there isn’t a natural explanation & there doesn’t seem to be the potential of finding one, then I believe it’s appropriate to look at a supernatural explanation. I think that’s the most reasonable inference based on the evidence.”

That seemed to be a big concession for someone trained in science. “You don’t see a problem in saying that the best explanation seems to be an Intelligent Designer?”

“Absolutely not. I think people who believe that life emerged naturalistically need to have a great deal more faith than people who reasonably infer that there’s an Intelligent Designer.”

“What prevents more scientists from drawing that conclusion?”

“Many have reached that conclusion. But for some, their philosophy gets in the way. If they’re persuaded ahead of time that there isn’t a God, then no matter how compelling the evidence, they’ll always say, ‘Wait & we’ll find something better in the future.’ But that’s a metaphysical argument. Scientists aren’t more objective than anybody else. They all come to questions like this with their preconceived ideas.”

I quickly interjected, “Yes, but you came in with a preconceived idea that there is a God.”

Bradley nodded. “Sure,” he conceded. “And I’ve been pleasantly surprised, because a lower level of evidence probably would have satisfied me. But what I’ve found is absolutely overwhelming evidence that points toward an Intelligent Designer.”

“So you think the facts point convincingly toward a Creator?”

“Convincingly is too mild a term,” he replied. “The evidence is compelling. ‘Convincing’ suggests it’s a little more likely than not; ‘compelling’ says you have to really work hard not to get to that conclusion.”

“But it sounds so ... I said, stumbling a bit while searching for the right word, “unscientific,” I finally said.

“On the contrary,” Bradley replied, “it’s very scientific. For the past 150 years, scientists have used arguments based on analogies to things we do understand to formulate new hypotheses in emerging areas of scientific work. And that’s what this is about.”



## Reasoning by Analogy

The analogical method was described in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by astronomer John Herschel, who wrote: “If the analogy of 2 phenomena be very close & striking, while, at the same time, the cause of one is very obvious, it becomes scarcely possible to refuse to admit the action of an analogous cause in the other, though not so obvious in itself.”

“How does this apply to the origin-of-life issue?” I asked Bradley.

“If the only time we see written information—whether it’s a painting on a cave wall or a novel from Amazon.com—is when there’s an intelligence behind it, then wouldn’t that also be true of nature itself?” Bradley said in responding.

“In other words, what is encoded on the DNA inside every cell of every living creature is purely & simply written information. We use a 26-letter alphabet in English; in [DNA, there is a 4-letter chemical alphabet](#), whose letters combine in various sequences to form words, sentences, & paragraphs. These comprise all the instructions needed to guide the functioning of the cell. They spell out in coded form the instructions for how a cell makes proteins. It works just the way alphabetical letter sequences do in our language.

“Now, when we see written language, we can infer, based on our experience, that it has an intelligent cause. And we can legitimately use analogical reasoning to conclude that the remarkable information sequences in DNA also had an intelligent cause. [Therefore, this means life on earth came from a ‘who’ instead of a ‘what’.](#)”

“Did you see the [movie \*Contact\*](#)?”

“Sure,” I said. “It was based on [Carl Sagan’s book](#).”

“That’s right,” he replied. “In the movie, scientists are scanning the skies for signs of intelligent life in space. Their radio-telescopes just receive static—random sounds from space. It’s reasonable to assume there’s no intelligence behind that. Then one day they begin receiving a transmission of prime numbers, which are numbers divisible only by themselves & one.

“The scientists reason that it’s too improbable that there would be a natural cause behind a string of numbers like that. This wasn’t merely unorganized static; it was information, a message with content. From that, they concluded there was an intelligent cause behind it. As Sagan himself once said, ‘The receipt of a single message from space’ would be enough to know there’s an intelligence out there. That’s reasoning by analogy—we know that where there’s intelligent communication, there’s an intelligent cause.”

Bradley’s [eyes bored in on me as he delivered his conclusion](#). “And if a single message from space is enough for us to conclude there’s an intelligence behind it, then what about the vast amounts of information contained in the DNA of every living plant & animal?” he said.

“[Each cell in the human body contains more information than in all 30 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica](#). It’s certainly reasonable to make the inference that this isn’t the random product of unguided nature, but it’s the unmistakable sign of an Intelligent Designer.”

It was [an argument without an answer](#). “Then,” I said, “[the origin of life is the Achilles heel of evolution.](#)”

“That’s right. As Phillip Johnson said, ‘If Darwinists are to keep the Creator out of the picture, they have to provide a naturalistic explanation for the origin of life.’

“Lee, they haven’t been able to do it. [Despite all their efforts, they haven’t even come up with a single possibility that even remotely makes sense](#). And there’s no prospect they will. In fact, everything is pointing the other way—in the unmistakable direction of God. Today it takes a great deal of faith to be an honest scientist who is an atheist.”

## “I build molecules”

[By happenstance](#), over in nearby Houston, nanoscientist James Tour, a professor at Rice University’s Department of Chemistry & Center for Nanoscale Science & Technology, had recently finished giving a

speech.

With a [doctorate in organic chemistry from Purdue University](#) & post-doctoral work at Stanford University & the University of Wisconsin, Tour is [on the cutting edge of research into the molecular world](#). He has written more than 140 technical research articles & [holds 17 U.S. patents](#).

[“I build molecules for a living,”](#) he said in introducing himself. [“I can’t begin to tell you how difficult that job is.”](#)

The purpose of his talk was not to dazzle the audience with descriptions of his latest high-tech efforts to store enormous amounts of information on a microscopic scale, replacing silicon chips that are large & unwieldy by comparison. Instead, it was to describe something else he has found the deeper & deeper he has probed into the awe-inspiring wonders of the molecular level: the fingerprints of an Intelligent Designer.

[“I stand in awe of God because of what He has done through His Creation,”](#) he said. [“Only a rookie who knows nothing about science would say science takes away from faith. If you really study science, it will bring you closer to God.”](#)

How ironic, I thought. Once, a rudimentary understanding of evolutionary science had propelled me toward atheism; now, an increasing grasp of molecular science was cementing my confidence in God. Like the Oklahoma murder case, my [initial verdict had been based on flawed evidence that yielded a flawed conclusion](#).

### **OBJECTION: GOD ISN'T WORTHY OF WORSHIP IF HE KILLS INNOCENT CHILDREN**

When attention is focused on the little-mentioned [Old Testament stories of massacres & other broad-scale bloodshed](#), [God’s image as a loving & benevolent deity gets called into question](#). Do these brutal accounts disclose the true character of God? And if they do, does He deserve to be worshiped?

Charles Templeton has his own opinion. “The God of the Old Testament is utterly unlike the God believed in by most practicing Christians,” he said. “His justice is, by modern standards, outrageous.... He is biased, querulous, vindictive, & jealous of his prerogatives.”

Atheist George H. Smith agrees. [“The Old Testament God garnered an impressive list of atrocities,”](#) he said. [Smith likes to quote former president Thomas Jefferson as saying that the Old Testament accounts reveal God to be “cruel, vindictive, capricious & unjust.”](#)

This issue is disturbing enough, but in addition there’s an ancillary matter that demands to be explored. In evaluating the character of God, both critics & Christians [cite the Bible as their source of information](#). [But is it really a trustworthy book? Isn’t the Bible chock full of contradictions & inconsistencies that undermine its reliability? Haven’t its references to history been called into question by modern archaeology? Isn’t it more likely a collection of imaginative legends than an accurate description of the Creator of the universe?](#)

These 2 issues—the character of God & the reliability of the book that purports to tell us about Him were major hurdles when I was a spiritual seeker. At the time, I immersed myself in books & articles to try to come to some well-reasoned conclusions. I wish I could have done then what I was about to do now: sit down to interview a [scholar who is one of the most well-known & effective defenders of Christianity in the world](#).

### **INTERVIEW: NORMAN L. GEISLER, PH.D.**

Norman Geisler can be a [tenacious & intimidating debater when he’s marshalling biblical references, archaeological findings, scientific discoveries, & historical events to refute](#) someone bent on discrediting Christianity. His [encyclopedic memory & rapid-fire delivery have overwhelmed many critics](#) through the years.

But it was a soft-spoken & grandfatherly Geisler who invited me into his modest yet comfortable

office at Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he is president of the school.

Geisler, a [prodigious & award-winning author](#), has written, co-authored, or edited more than 50 books. He has traveled widely—through all 50 states & [25 countries](#) on 6 continents—giving lectures on the evidence for Christianity & debating such [well-known skeptics as Paul Kurtz](#). Consequently, I knew there was little chance that I would take him completely off guard by a question. However, I came armed with some of the most difficult issues of all.

As we sat across from each other in [maroon leather chairs](#), I pulled out a piece of paper on which I had jotted the biting words of an esteemed American patriot whose criticism of Christianity is legendary.

[“In 1794,” I began, “Thomas Paine wrote in \*The Age of Reason\*: ‘Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel & torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the work of a demon, than the Word of God.’](#)

“That’s a tough challenge,” I said. “How would you respond to him if he were sitting here today?”

Geisler [adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses, then remarked with a chuckle, “First of all, I’d say too bad he didn’t have a Bible.](#) When he wrote the first part of *The Age of Reason*, he didn’t have one. But apart from that, I think he’s [confusing 2 things: what the Bible records & what the Bible approves.”](#)

“Give me some examples of the difference,” I said.

“For instance, the Bible records Satan’s lies & David’s adultery, but it doesn’t approve of them,” he explained. “It’s true that there are a lot of gross stories in the Bible. The book of Judges reports the raping of a woman, then cutting her in 12 pieces & sending one piece to each of the tribes of Israel. But the Bible certainly doesn’t approve of that. Secondly, I think that Paine is just factually wrong. The Bible doesn’t have any cruel & torturous executions that God commanded.”

I raised my hand to protest. “David was called a man after God’s own heart, & yet the Bible says he tortured his enemies,” I pointed out. “It says he ‘put them under saws, & under axes or iron, & made them pass through the brick-kiln.’ That sounds cruel & torturous to me!”

“Not so fast,” Geisler cautioned. “You’re quoting from the KJV, & it’s open to misinterpretation there. The NIV clarifies the original Hebrew language & says David ‘brought out the people who were there, [consigning them to labor with](#) saws & with iron picks & axes, & he made them work at brick-making.’ That’s labor—not torture—and it’s quite humane compared to the cruelties his enemies had unleashed. Besides, this is another case where the Bible records something but doesn’t necessarily condone it.”

Quickly regrouping, I pressed on. “That passage aside, there’s still a lot of carnage in the Old Testament,” I said.

### **God’s Orders to Kill**

[“God ordered genocide by telling the Israelites in Deut.7 to ‘totally destroy’ the Canaanites & 6 other nations & to ‘show them no mercy.’”](#)

That got me started on a roll. “And that wasn’t an isolated incident,” I continued, picking up speed as I went. “[God ordered the execution of every Egyptian firstborn; He flooded the world & killed untold thousands of people; He told the Israelites: ‘Now go, attack the Amalekites & totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men & women, children & infants, cattle & sheep, camels & donkeys.’](#) That sounds more like a violent & brutal God than a loving one. How can people be expected to worship Him if He orders innocent children to be slaughtered?”

[Despite the force of the question, Geisler retained a calm & reasoned tone. “This shows,” he said, “that God’s character is absolutely holy, & that He has got to punish sin & rebellion. He’s a righteous judge; that’s undeniably part of Who He is. But, second, His character is also merciful. Listen: if anyone wants to escape, He will let them.”](#)

Geisler paused. “Lee, you’ve raised a whole bunch of good issues, & they deserve a thoughtful response,” he said. “[Do you mind if we go through those passages a little more carefully? Because if we do, I think we’ll see the same pattern over & over.](#)”

“Let’s start with the Amalekites,” he began. “Listen, Lee, they were far from innocent. Far from it. These were not nice people. In fact, they were utterly & totally depraved. Their mission was to destroy Israel. In other words, to commit genocide. As if that weren’t evil enough, think what was hanging in the balance. The Israelites were the chosen people through whom God would bring salvation to the entire world through Jesus Christ.”

“So you’re saying they deserved to be destroyed?” I asked.

“The destruction of their nation was necessitated by the gravity of their sin,” Geisler said. “Had some hardcore remnant survived, they might have resumed their aggression against the Israelites & God’s plan. These were a persistent & vicious & warring people. To show you how reprehensible they were, they had been following the Israelites & had been cowardly slaughtering the most vulnerable among them—the weak, elderly, & disabled who were lagging behind.

“They wanted to wipe every last one of the Israelites off the face of the earth. God could have dealt with them through a natural disaster like a flood, but instead He used Israel as his instrument of judgment. He took action not only for the sake of the Israelites, but ultimately for the sake of everyone through history whose salvation would be provided by the Messiah Who was to be born among them.”

“But the children,” I protested. “Why did innocent children need to be killed?”

“People assume that what’s wrong for us is wrong for God. It’s wrong for me to take your life, because I didn’t make it & I don’t own it. It’s wrong for me to go into your yard & pull up your bushes, cut them down, kill them, transplant them, move them around. I can do that in my yard, because I own the bushes in my yard.

“Well, God is sovereign over all of life & He has the right to take it if He wishes. In fact, we tend to forget that God takes the life of every human being. It’s called death. The only question is when & how, which we have to leave up to Him.”

### **What about the children?**

Intellectually, I could understand Geisler’s answer up to this point. However, emotionally it didn’t go far enough. I was still unsettled. “But the children…” I persisted.

Geisler, himself the father of 6 children & grandfather of 9, was sympathetic. “Lee, you need to understand the situation among the Amalekites. In that thoroughly evil & violent & depraved culture, there was no hope for those children. This nation was so polluted that it was like gangrene that was taking over a person’s leg, & God had to amputate the leg or the gangrene would spread & there wouldn’t be anything left. In a sense, God’s action was an act of mercy.”

“Mercy?” I asked. “How so?”

“According to the Bible, every child who dies before the age of accountability goes to Heaven to spend eternity in the presence of God,” he replied. “Now, if they had continued to live in that horrible society, past the age of accountability, they undoubtedly would have become corrupted.”

“What makes you think children go to Heaven when they die?” I asked.

“King David spoke of going to be with his son who died at birth. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to Me, & do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these,’ which indicates they will go to Heaven. There’s a considerable amount of other scriptural support for this position as well.”

“So,” I said, “you don’t think God was being unreasonable by ordering the destruction of the Amalekites?”

“You have to remember that these people were given plenty of opportunity to change their ways & to avoid all of this,” he said. “In fact, if you take all of the Canaanites along with the Amalekites, they had 400 years to repent. That’s a very long time. Finally, after waiting centuries to give them an opportunity to abandon their path toward self-destruction, God’s nature demanded that He deal with their willful evil. He certainly didn’t act precipitously.

“Now, we have to keep in mind that those who had wanted to get out of this situation had already done so; they had ample opportunity through the years. Surely the ones who wanted to be saved from

destruction fled & were spared.

“In Josh.6, where the Bible talks about the destruction of Jericho & the Canaanites, you’ve got the same pattern. This was a **thoroughly evil culture, so much so that the Bible says it nauseated God. They were into brutality, cruelty, incest, bestiality, even child sacrifice by fire. They were an aggressive culture that wanted to annihilate the Israelites.**

“Again, you’ve got evil people who were destroyed but the righteous among them who were saved. For instance, Rahab, who protected the Israelite spies, was not judged with the other people. And look at what happened to the corrupt residents of the city of Nineveh. **God was going to judge them because they deserved it, but they repented & God saved the whole bunch.** So here’s the point: whoever has repented, God has been willing to save. That’s important to remember.

“You see, **God’s purpose in these instances was to destroy the corrupt nation because the national structure was inherently evil, not to destroy people if they were willing to repent.** Many verses indicate that God’s primary desire was to drive these evil people out of the land that they already knew had been promised for a long time to Israel. That way, Israel could come in & be **relatively free from the outside corruption that could have destroyed it like a cancer.** He wanted to create an environment where the Messiah could come for the benefit of millions of people through history.”

“The pattern, then, was that people had plenty of warning?” I asked.

“Certainly,” he said. “And consider this: most of the women & children would have fled in advance before the actual fighting began, leaving behind the warriors to face the Israelites. The fighters who remained would have been the most hardened, the ones who stubbornly refused to leave, the carriers of the corrupt culture. So it’s really questionable how many women & children might actually have been involved anyway.

“**Besides, under the rules of conduct God had given to the Israelites, whenever they went into an enemy city they were to first make the people an offer of peace.** The people had a choice: they could accept that offer, in which case they wouldn’t be killed, or they could reject the offer at their own peril. That’s appropriate & fair.”

“God, then, was not being capricious?”

“**He’s not capricious, He’s not arbitrary, He’s not cruel. But, Lee, I have to tell you something: He is undeniably just. His nature demands that he deal with corrupt people who stubbornly & willfully persist in their evil.** And isn’t that what He should do? Isn’t that what we want for justice to be done? One of the key things to remember is that throughout history, for those who repent & turn to Him, He’s compassionate, merciful, gracious, & kind. In the end, we’ll all see, His fairness.”

**Still, there was another troubling episode—again, involving children—that seemed to challenge Geisler’s opinion that God does not act capriciously. It involves one of the strangest episodes in the entire Bible.**

### **Cosmic overkill?**

The prophet Elisha was walking down the road toward Bethel when he was confronted by some little children who teased him by making fun of his baldness. “Go on up, you baldhead!” they taunted. “Go on up, you baldhead!” He reacted by cursing them in the name of God. Then, in a stunning act of retribution, 2 bears suddenly emerged from the woods & mauled 42 of them.

“Now, Dr. Geisler, you insisted that God is not capricious,” I said. “But that sounds like an outrageous response to a minor & silly offense. **Mauling 42 innocent little children just because they poked fun of some bald guy is awfully severe.**”

Geisler was well-acquainted with the issue. “The presupposition of your question is wrong,” Geisler replied. “These were not small innocent children.”

Having anticipated his response, I pulled out a photocopy of the passage & thrust it in his direction. “Yes, they were,” I retorted. “Look right there,” I said, pointing to the words. “It says ‘little children.’”

Geisler glanced briefly at the page, immediately recognizing its source. “**Unfortunately, the KJV has a misleading translation there,**” he said. “**Scholars have established that the original Hebrew is best translated**

‘young men.’ The NIV renders the word ‘youths.’ As best we can tell, this was a violent mob of dangerous teenagers, comparable to a modern street gang. The life of the prophet was in danger by the sheer number of them—if 42 were mauled, who knows how many were threatening him in total?”

“Threatening him?” I asked. “Give me a break! They were just making fun of his baldness.”

“When you understand the context, you’ll see that this was much more serious than that,” Geisler replied. “Commentators have noted that their taunts were intended to challenge Elisha’s claim to be a prophet. Essentially, they were saying, ‘If you’re a man of God, why don’t you go up to Heaven like the prophet Elijah did?’ Apparently, they were mocking the earlier work of God in taking Elijah to Heaven. They were contemptuous in their disbelief over what God had done through both of these prophets.

“And their remarks about Elisha being bald were most likely a reference to the fact that lepers in those days shaved their heads. So they were assailing Elisha—a man of dignity & authority as a prophet of God—as a detestable & despicable outcast. They were casting a slur on not only his character, but on God’s, since he was God’s representative.”

“Still,” I said, “isn’t that a rather minor offense?”

“Not in the context of those days,” he said. “Elisha justifiably felt threatened by the gang. His life was in danger. They were, in effect, attacking him & God. This was a kind of preemptory strike to put fear in the hearts of anyone else who would do this, because this could be a dangerous precedent. If a menacing mob of teenagers got away with this & God didn’t come to the defense of his prophet, just think of the negative effect that would have on society. It could open the door to further attacks on prophets & consequently a disregard for the urgent message they were trying to bring from God.

“In fact, as one commentator said, ‘Instead of demonstrating unleashed cruelty, the bear attack shows God trying repeatedly to bring His people back to Himself through smaller judgments until the people’s sin is too great & judgment must come full force.... The disastrous fall of Samaria would have been avoided had the people repented after the bear attack.’

“Last of all,” Geisler added, “I’d say once again that we have to consider the sovereignty of God. It wasn’t Elisha who took their lives; it was the God Who created them Who let the bears loose. And if **He created life, He has every right to take it away**. The attack of this gang on the prophet revealed their true attitudes toward God, & it’s always a perilous path that leads to destruction when you defiantly curse & stubbornly oppose God.”

I folded the photocopy of the passage. “Then it’s a misreading of the original text to see these as mere children,” I said.

“That’s right,” he said. “The Hebrew that was used to describe them indicates they were most likely between the ages of 12-30. In fact, one of the same Hebrew words is used elsewhere to describe men in the army. As you can see, when everything is put into perspective, you get a much different picture than was originally supposed.”

### **Can the Bible Be Trusted?**

In assessing the character of God, Geisler was relying on the Bible. Having authored a book on the inerrancy of Scripture, Geisler’s opinion of it is well known: he believes the Bible to be uniquely inspired by God & factual in all it teaches & touches upon. Still, is there any rational reason to believe that the Bible really does accurately reveal the truth about God?

George H. Smith, the atheistic philosopher, thinks not. “The Bible shows no traces whatsoever of supernatural influence,” he said. “Quite the contrary, it is obviously the product of superstitious men who, at times, were willing to deceive if it would further their doctrines.”

Templeton cavalierly dismisses most of the Bible as being “embellished folk tales,” adding that it is “no longer possible for an informed man or woman to believe that ... the Bible is either a reliable document ... or, as the Christian church insists, the infallible Word of God.”

During my years as an atheist, I mocked the fantastical tales & blatant mythology that I believed disqualified the Bible from being a divinely inspired book—an **opinion, incidentally, that quite**

**conveniently relieved me from any need to follow its moral dictates.** Although I had never thoroughly studied its contents, I was quick to reject the Bible in order to free myself to live the kind of corrupt lifestyle that was blatantly at odds with its tenets.

My time with Geisler was a rare opportunity to hear firsthand why he draws the opposite conclusion & so zealously defends the Bible as being trustworthy. I stood to stretch my legs, walking over to a bookshelf & casually scanning the titles. Then I turned & said, “Everything hinges on whether the Bible is true. What’s your basis for believing it is?”

With characteristic confidence, Geisler replied, “There’s **more evidence that the Bible is a reliable source than there is for any other book from the ancient world.**”

“You’re going to have to give me some facts to back that up,” I said.

“There’s lots of evidence I could talk about,” he began. “I could talk about the Bible’s unity—66 books written in different literary styles by perhaps 40 different authors with diverse backgrounds over 1500 years, & yet the Bible amazingly unfolds one continuous drama with one central message. That points to the existence of the divine Mind that the writers claimed inspired them.

“And there’s the Bible’s **transforming power**—from the beginning, it has renewed people; given them hope, courage, purpose, wisdom, guidance, & power; & formed an anchor for their lives. While early Islam was spread by the sword, early Christianity spread by the Spirit, even while Christians were being killed by Roman swords.

“I believe the most convincing evidence falls into 2 categories, however. First, there’s archaeological confirmation of its reliability, and, second, there’s miraculous confirmation of its divine authority.”

### **Reason #1: Confirmation by Archaeology**

Geisler started his discussion of the archaeological evidence by quoting the Words of Jesus, Who said: “I have spoken to you of earthly things & you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?”

“Conversely,” said Geisler, “if we can trust the Bible when it’s telling us about straightforward earthly things that can be verified, then we can trust it in areas where we can’t directly verify it in an empirical way.”

“How, then, has the Bible been corroborated?” I asked.

“There have been **thousands—not hundreds—of archaeological finds in the Middle East that support the picture presented in the biblical record.** There was a discovery not long ago confirming King David. The patriarchs—the narratives about Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob—were once considered legendary, but as more has become known, these stories are increasingly corroborated. The destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah was thought to be mythological until evidence was uncovered that all 5 of the cities mentioned in Genesis were, in fact, situated just as the Old Testament said. As far as their destruction goes, archaeologist Clifford Wilson said there is ‘permanent evidence of the great conflagration that took place in the long distant past.’

“Furthermore,” Geisler added, “various aspects of the Jewish captivity have been confirmed. Also, **every reference in the Old Testament to an Assyrian king has been proven correct;** an excavation during the 1960s confirmed that the Israelites could, indeed, have entered Jerusalem by way of a tunnel during David’s reign; there is evidence the world did have a single language at one time, as the Bible says; the site of Solomon’s temple is now being excavated; & on & on. **Many times, archaeologists have been skeptical of the Old Testament, only to have new discoveries corroborate the biblical account.**”

“For example ... I said.

“For instance, Samuel says that after Saul’s death his armor was put in the temple of Ashtoreth, who was a Canaanite fertility goddess, at Bethshan, while Chronicles reports that his head was put in the temple of a **Philistine corn god named Dagon.** Now, archaeologists thought that must have been an error & therefore the Bible was unreliable. They didn’t think enemies would have had temples in the same place at the same time.”

“What did the archaeologists find?” I asked.

“They confirmed through excavations that there were 2 temples at that site, one each for Dagon &

Ashtoreth. They were separated by a hallway. As it turned out, the Philistines had apparently adopted Ashtoreth as one of their own goddesses. The Bible was right after all.

“That kind of phenomenon has happened again & again. The Bible makes about 3 dozen references to the Hittites, but critics used to charge that there was no evidence that such people ever existed. Now archaeologists digging in modern Turkey have discovered the records of the Hittites. As the great archaeologist William Albright declared, ‘There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament tradition.’”

I asked Geisler to continue by briefly summarizing why he believes that archaeology corroborates the New Testament.

“The noted Roman historian Colin Hemer, in *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, shows how archaeology has confirmed not dozens, but hundreds & hundreds of details from the biblical account of the Early Church,” Geisler said. “Even small details have been corroborated, like which way the wind blows, how deep the water is a certain distance from shore, what kind of disease a particular island had, the names of local officials, & so forth.

“Now, Acts was authored by the historian Luke. Hemer gives more than a dozen reasons for why Acts had to have been written before A.D. 62, or about 30 years after Jesus’ crucifixion. Even earlier, Luke wrote the gospel of Luke, which is substantially the same as the other biblical accounts of Jesus’ life.

“So here you have an impeccable historian, who has been proven right in hundreds of details & never proven wrong, writing the whole history of Jesus & the early church. And it’s written within one generation while eyewitnesses were still alive & could have disputed it if it were exaggerated or false. You don’t have anything like that from any other religious book from the ancient world.”

“Is Hemer a lone voice on that?” I asked.

“Hardly,” came the reply. “Prominent historian Sir William Ramsay started out as a skeptic, but after studying Acts he concluded that ‘in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth.’ The great Oxford University classical historian A.N. Sherwin-White said, ‘For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming,’ & that ‘any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd.’

“Earlier, I mentioned archaeologist William Albright, who was a leader in the American School of Oriental Research for 40 years. He started out as a liberal but became more & more conservative as he studied the archaeological record. He concluded that the radical New Testament critics are ‘pre-archaeological’ & their views are ‘quite antiquated.’”

I sat back in my leather chair as I reflected on Geisler’s barrage of facts & quotes. The argument was strong: if archaeology shows the Bible was accurate in what can be checked out, why would it be any less accurate in its other points? That only proves so much, however.

“Even if archaeology does confirm that the Bible is historically accurate, that doesn’t mean it’s divinely authoritative,” I said.

“Correct,” Geisler said crisply. “The only reason why anyone should accept the Bible as divinely authoritative is because it has miraculous confirmation.”

## **Reason #2: Evidence of Divine Origin**

Geisler thumbed through his well-worn Bible, turning all the way to its opening sentence & then balancing the open book on his lap.

“It all goes back to whether the first verse of the Bible is true when it says, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens & the earth,’” Geisler said. “I believe there’s overwhelming scientific evidence that it is true—everything that has a beginning has a beginner; the universe had a beginning, therefore it had a beginner; the universe was tweaked & fine-tuned from the very moment of Creation for the emergence of human life; & so on.”

I interrupted to inform him that I had already interviewed William Craig about the evidence pointing to a divine origin of the universe.

“Ah, good,” he said. “What people often forget is that if this first verse is true, not only are miracles



possible, but miracles are actual, because the biggest miracle has already happened—making something out of nothing. What’s harder: for Jesus to take water & turn it into wine or to take a handful of nothing & make water? It’s a lot harder to make water out of nothing than to make wine out of water.

“A skeptic once said to me, ‘I don’t believe the Bible because it has miracles.’ I said, ‘Name one.’ He said, ‘Turning water into wine. Do you believe that?’ I said, ‘Yeah, it happens all the time.’ He said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘Well, rain goes through the grapevine, up into the grape, & the grape turns into wine. All Jesus did was speed it up a little bit.’

“My point is if you’ve got a God Who can make something out of nothing, then He can make miracles. And then the only thing we have to look at is what book in the world has been miraculously confirmed. There’s only one, & that’s the Bible.”

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me how.”

Geisler raised 2 fingers. “Two ways,” he said. “First, the Bible is miraculously confirmed by the fulfillment of predictive prophecies, and, second, it’s confirmed by the miracles performed by those who purported to be speaking for God.”

### Confirmation by Prophecies

“The Bible is the only book in the world that has precise, specific predictions that were made hundreds of years in advance & that were literally fulfilled.”

Gesturing toward one of the books packed into his shelves, he continued by saying, “According to *Barton Payne’s Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, there are **191 predictions in the Old Testament about the coming of Christ**, including His ancestry, the city in which he would be born, that he would be born of a virgin, precisely the time in history when he would die, & so on.

“In fact, Ps.22:16 says His hands & feet would be pierced; verse 14 says His bones would be out of joint; verse 18 talks about the casting of lots for His garments; & Zech.12:10 says He would be pierced, as Jesus was with a lance. That’s obviously a picture of His crucifixion—however, it was written before crucifixion was even implemented as a method of execution by the Romans. The Jews stoned people to death back then.

“And, of course, Is.53:2-12 has perhaps the most amazing predictions about Christ in the entire Old Testament. It foretells 12 aspects of His Passion that were all fulfilled—He would be rejected, be a man of sorrow, live a life of suffering, be despised by others, carry our sorrow, be smitten & afflicted by God, be pierced for our transgressions, be wounded for our sins, would suffer like a lamb, would die with the wicked, would be sinless, & would pray for others.”

I spoke up. “Wait a second,” I said. “If you talk to a **rabbi, he’ll tell you that passage refers symbolically to Israel**, not to the Messiah.”

Geisler shook his head. “**In Old Testament times, the Jewish rabbis *did* consider this to be a prophecy concerning the Messiah**. That’s the opinion that’s really relevant,” he said.

“Only later, after Christians pointed out this was obviously referring to Jesus, did they begin saying it was really about the suffering Jewish nation. But clearly that’s wrong.

“Isaiah customarily refers to the Jewish people in the first-person plural, like ‘our’ or ‘we,’ but he always refers to the Messiah in the third-person singular, like ‘he’ & ‘him’—& that’s what he did in Is.53. Plus, anyone who reads it for themselves will readily see it’s referring to Jesus. Maybe that’s why it’s usually skipped over in synagogues these days.

“So here you have incredible predictions that were literally fulfilled in the life of one man, even though He had no control over most of them. For instance, He couldn’t have arranged His ancestry, the timing of His birth, & so on. These prophecies were written 200-400 years in advance. No other book in the world has this. The Bible is the only book that’s supernaturally confirmed this way.

“There are a number of prophecies that establish the divine authority of the Bible. Mathematics has shown that there’s absolutely no way they could have been fulfilled by mere chance.”

Geisler summed up his arguments: “When you add this up—the historical reliability of the Bible as

authenticated by archaeology, the miraculous fulfillment of clear predictive prophecies, & the performance of documented miracles—you get a supernaturally confirmed book unlike any other in history.”

I wanted to clarify something. “What you’re not saying is, ‘I believe the Bible is divinely inspired because it says it is.’”

“That’s right. But, the argument goes like this: the Bible *claims* to be the Word of God & the Bible *proves* to be the Word of God.”

### **Coping with Contradictions**

When I asked about alleged contradictions in the Bible, Geisler leaned back in his chair & smiled. It was an issue he had spent a lifetime studying.

“I’ve made a hobby of collecting alleged discrepancies, inaccuracies, & conflicting statements in the Bible,” he said. “I have a list of about 800 of them. A few years ago I coauthored a book called *When Critics Ask*, which devotes nearly 600 pages to setting the record straight. All I can tell you is that in my experience when critics raise these objections, they invariably violate one of **17 principles for interpreting Scripture.**”

“What are those?” I asked.

“For example, assuming the unexplained is unexplainable. I’m sure some sharp critic could say to me, ‘What about this issue?’ & even though I’ve done a 40-year study of these things, I wouldn’t be able to answer him. What does that prove—that the Bible has an error or Geisler is ignorant? I’d give the benefit of the doubt to the Bible, because of the 800 allegations I’ve studied, I haven’t found one single error in the Bible, but I’ve found a lot of errors by the critics.”

I cocked my head. “Is that really reasonable, though, to give the Bible the benefit of the doubt?”

“Yes, it is,” he insisted. “When a scientist comes upon an anomaly in nature, does he give up science? When our space probe found braided rings around Jupiter, this was contrary to all scientific explanations. So do you remember when all the NASA scientists resigned because they couldn’t explain it?”

I laughed. “Of course not,” I said.

“Exactly. They didn’t give up. They said, ‘Ah, there must be an explanation,’ & they continued to study. I approach the Bible the same way. It has proven over & over to be accurate, even when I initially thought it wasn’t. Why shouldn’t I give it the benefit of the doubt now? We need to approach the Bible the way an American is treated in court: presumed innocent until proven guilty.

“Critics do the opposite. They denied the Hittites of the Old Testament ever existed. Now archaeologists have found the Hittite library. Critics say, ‘Well, I guess the Bible was right in that verse, but I don’t accept the rest.’ Wait a minute—when it has been proven to be accurate over & over again in hundreds of details, the burden of proof is on the critic, not on the Bible.”

I asked Geisler to briefly describe some of the other principles for resolving apparent conflicts in Scripture.

“For example,” he said, “failing to understand the context of the passage. This is the most common mistake critics make. Taking words out of context, you can even cause the Bible to prove there’s no God. After all, Ps.14:1 comes right out & says it: ‘There is no God.’ But, of course, in context it says, The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ Therefore, context is critically important, & most often critics are guilty of wrenching verses out of context to create an alleged discrepancy when there isn’t one.

“Another mistake is assuming a partial report is a false report. Matthew reports that Peter said to Jesus, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Mark said, ‘You are the Christ.’ Luke said, ‘The Christ of God.’ Critics say, ‘See? Error!’ I say, ‘Where’s the error?’ Matthew didn’t say, ‘You *aren’t* the Christ’ & Mark said, ‘You are.’ Matthew gave more. That’s not an error; those are complementary.

“Other mistakes include neglecting to interpret difficult passages in light of clear ones; basing a teaching on an obscure passage; forgetting that the Bible uses non-technical, everyday language; failing to remember the Bible uses different literary devices; & forgetting that the Bible is a human book with human characteristics. But like Christ, the Bible is totally human, yet without error.”

“However,” I interjected, “people bring up alleged contradictions all the time.”

“Like what, for example?” he responded. “What are the most common you hear?”

I thought for a moment. “Matthew says there was one angel at Jesus’ tomb; John says there were 2. The gospels say Judas hung himself; Acts says his bowels gushed out.”

“You’re right; those are frequently cited,” he replied. “But they’re easily reconciled. Concerning the angels, have you ever noticed that whenever you have 2 of any thing, you also have one? It never fails. Matthew didn’t say there was *only* one. John was providing more detail by saying there were 2.

“As for Judas’ suicide, you hang yourself in a tree or over the edge of a cliff. It was against the law to touch a dead body in those days. So somebody came along later, found his body, cut the rope, & the bloated body fell onto the rocks. What happens? The bowels gush out, just as the Bible says. They’re not contradictory, they’re complementary.”

### Why Is It Hard to Believe?

“One more thing before we go,” I said as I read Geisler the colorful words of a frustrated spiritual seeker:

So if I want to avoid Hell, I presumably have to believe that a snake talked to Eve, that a virgin got pregnant from God, that a whale swallowed a prophet, that the Red Sea was parted, & all sorts of other crazy things. Well, if God wants me so bad ... why does He make believing in Him so ... impossible? ... It seems to me that an all-powerful God could do a much better job of convincing people of His existence than any evangelist ever does.... **Just write it in the sky, nice & big: “Here’s your proof, Ed. Believe in Me or go to Hell! Sincerely, the Almighty.”**

Looking up at Geisler, I said, “What would you say to him?”

“My answer would be that God *did* do something like that,” he replied. “**Ps.19:1 says, ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; & the firmament proclaims His handiwork. In fact, it’s written across the heavens so vividly that more & more scientists who search the stars are becoming Christians.**

“The great cosmologist Allan Sandage, who won astronomy’s version of the Nobel Prize, concluded that God is ‘the explanation for the miracle of existence.’ **Sir Fred Hoyle, who devised the steady state theory of the universe to avoid the existence of God, eventually became a believer in an Intelligent Designer of the universe.**

“The **astrophysicist Hugh Ross, who got his doctorate in astronomy from the University of Toronto & did research on quasars & galaxies, said scientific & historical evidence ‘deeply rooted my confidence in the veracity of the Bible.’** Robert Jastrow, a confessed agnostic & director of the Mount Wilson Observatory & founder of the Goddard Space Institute, concluded the Big Bang points toward God. And I like what mathematical physicist Robert Griffiths said: **‘If we need an atheist for a debate, I go to the philosophy department. The physics department isn’t much use.’** The evidence, Lee, is so clear.”

Not to a skeptic like Bertrand Russell, I noted. “He said if he someday stands before God & is asked why he never put his faith in Him, he’ll say he hadn’t been given enough evidence,” I reminded him.

Geisler, **one of whose hobbies is collecting quotes from atheists & agnostics,** pointed out something else Russell said. “He was asked in a *Look* magazine interview, ‘Under what condition would you believe in God,’ & he essentially said, “Well, if I heard a voice from Heaven & it predicted a series of things & they came to pass, then I guess I’d have to believe there’s some kind of supernatural being.”

In light of our discussion about the miraculous fulfillment of predictive prophecies in the Bible, the irony in Russell’s statement was obvious.

“I’d say, ‘Mr. Russell, there *has* been a voice from Heaven; it has predicted many things; & we’ve seen them undeniably come to pass,’” Geisler declared.

“Then you don’t think God is making it hard for people to believe?”

“On the contrary, the evidence is there if people will be willing to see it. **It’s not for a lack of evidence that people turn from God; it’s from their pride or their will. God is not going to force anyone**

into the fold. Love never works coercively. It only works persuasively. And there's plenty of persuasive evidence there."

I felt an obligation to disclose the identity of the person I quoted as asking why God makes it so difficult to believe. I told Geisler his name is Edward Boyd, & he made that remark to his son, Christian philosopher Gregory Boyd, as they exchanged a series of letters in which they debated the evidence for Christianity. In 1992, after personally weighing the evidence, the formerly skeptical Edward Boyd decided to become a follower of Jesus.

Geisler smiled at the story, & then he turned personal as he closed by discussing his personal faith.

"For me, I say the same thing that the Apostle Peter said: 'Lord, to Whom shall we go? You have the Words of eternal life.' He's the only One who not only claimed to be God but proved to be God. When I compare this to all other claimants of all other religions, it's like the poet who said the night has 1,000 eyes & the day has but one; the light of the whole world dies with the setting of the sun.

"At the midnight of human ignorance, there are a lot of lights in the sky. Noontime, there's only one. And that's Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. Based on the evidence for Who He was, there really aren't any competitors.

"So I cast my lot with Him—not the one who claimed wisdom, Confucius; or the one who claimed enlightenment, Buddha; or the one who claimed to be a prophet, Muhammad, but with the one who claimed to be God in human flesh. The one who declared, 'Before Abraham was born, I am'—& proved it."

#### OBJECTION:

#### IT'S OFFENSIVE TO CLAIM JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO GOD

Many people consider it arrogant, narrow-minded, & bigoted for Christians to contend that the only path to God must go through Jesus of Nazareth. In a day of religious pluralism & tolerance, this exclusivity claim is politically incorrect, a verbal slap in the face of other belief systems. Pluralist Rosemary Radford Ruether labeled it "absurd religious chauvinism," while one Jewish rabbi called it a "spiritual dictatorship" that fosters the kind of smug & superior attitude that can lead to hatred & violence toward people who believe differently.

Certainly an approach like the one expressed by Indian philosopher Swami Vivekenanda is much more acceptable today: "We [Hindus] accept all religions to be true," he told the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. The real sin, he said, is to call someone else a sinner.

That kind of open-mindedness & liberality fits well with our current culture of relativism, where no "fact" is considered universally true at all times, at all places, for all people, & in all cultures. Indeed, fully 2/3 of Americans now deny there's any such thing as truth.

When I was an atheist, I bristled at assertions by Christians that they held a monopoly on the only correct approach to religion. "Who do they think they are?" I'd grouse. "Who are they to judge everyone else? Where's the love of Jesus in that?"

Charles Templeton called it "insufferable presumption" for the Bible to claim that besides Jesus there is "no other Name under heaven ... by which we must be saved." Templeton added:

Christians are a small minority in the world. Approximately 4 out of every 5 people on the face of the earth believe in gods other than the Christian God. The more than 5 billion people who live on earth revere or worship more than 300 gods. If one includes the animist or tribal religions, the number rises to more than 3,000. *Are we to believe that only Christians are right?*

With a subject this volatile, I knew I needed to talk with an expert who has a crisp, analytical mind, a sound philosophical background, & extensive experience with a wide range of different world religions. Those criteria led me to a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, & the office of Ravi Zacharias, who was born & raised in India.

## INTERVIEW: RAVI ZACHARIAS, D.D., LL.D.

“There’s an old Indian saying that says there are 2 ways to get to your nose,” Ravi Zacharias told me as he removed his black suet coat & sat down at a round wooden table in his office.

“There’s this way,” he said, pointing directly to his nose. Then he reached around the back of his head & touched his nose from the far side. “And there’s this way,” he said with a smile.

In other words, **Indians sometimes prefer to take a long & circuitous route to an answer rather than getting to the point too quickly.** And sometimes that’s true of **Zacharias, who has earned a reputation as being among the world’s most astute & articulate defenders of Christianity.**

I had come to question him about Jesus’ claim that He is the sole path to God, an assertion He had made to His disciple Thomas. According to tradition, the once doubting Thomas, his faith bolstered by his encounter with the resurrected Christ, later **ventured deep into India to communicate the Christian message, finally being murdered near Madras.** Zacharias was born a scant 6 miles from the memorial erected to his martyrdom.

In a sense, Zacharias’ spiritual journey is reminiscent of Thomas’s. After **spending his early years as a Christian in name only, Zacharias found a tentative kind of faith at age 17 after hearing an American evangelist speak at a rally. Later he ended up in the hospital after attempting to kill himself over the meaninglessness of life,** an experience through which he became a radically devoted follower of Jesus & a Missionary from India to places around the world.

I knew his **experience in that multicultural, multi-religious environment,** where he grew up among Muslims, Hindus, & Sikhs, would enrich his perspective on this troubling question of Christ’s exclusivity. As he sipped hot tea, I pulled my notes out of my briefcase & immediately zeroed in on the topic at hand.

### The Arrogance of Christianity

“Forgive me for being blunt,” I said in prefacing my question, “but isn’t it grossly arrogant for Christians to claim Jesus is the one & only way to God? Why do Christians think they’re justified in asserting that they’re right & that everybody else in the world is wrong?”

“Lee, I hear that question so much, especially in the East,” he said, his voice animated & his eyes looking sincere & concerned. “The **first thing I do is try to deal with the misinformation that is inherent in it.**”

“Misinformation?” I asked. “Like what?”

“First,” he said, “it’s **important to understand that Christianity is not the only religion that claims exclusivity.** For instance, Muslims radically claim exclusivity—not just theologically, but also linguistically. Muslims believe that the sole, sufficient, & consummate miracle of Islam is the Koran. They say, however, it’s only recognizable in Arabic, & that any translation desacralizes it. And it’s not just a basic understanding of Arabic that’s required, but a sophisticated knowledge of the language.

“As for Buddhism, it was born when Gautama Buddha rejected 2 fundamental assertions of Hinduism—the ultimate authority of the Vedas, which are their scriptures, & the caste system. Hinduism itself is absolutely uncompromising on 3 issues: the law of karma, which is the law of moral cause & effect, so that every birth is a rebirth that makes recompense for the previous life; the authority of the Vedas; & reincarnation.”

I interrupted. “**But I’ve heard Hindus say quite nobly that Hinduism is a very tolerant faith,**” I said.

He smiled. “Whenever you hear that statement, **don’t take it at face value,**” he said. “What it really means is that Hinduism allows you to practice your religion so long as it buys into their notion of truth, which is syncretistic,” he said. **Syncretism is the attempt to blend together different or even opposing beliefs.**

“As for Sikhism,” he continued, “it came as a challenge to both Hinduism & Buddhism. Then there are the atheists—they reject the viewpoints of those who believe in God. And even Baha’ism, which claims to be a cosmic embrace of all religions, ends up excluding the exclusivists! Therefore, the statement that Christians are arrogant by claiming exclusivity **ignores the reality that every other major religion does as well.** So when people talk of arrogance, this cannot be a logical attack they are making.”

I started to formulate my next question, but Zacharias anticipated where it was headed & jumped in to complete my sentence.

“You believe that all truth—“ I began.

“Is, by definition, exclusive,” he said. “Yes, yes, I do. **Any time you make a truth claim, you mean something contrary to it is false.** Truth excludes its opposite.”

“There are those who deny that,” I observed.

“Yes, but think about this: **to deny the exclusive nature of truth is to make a truth claim,** & is that person then not arrogant too? That’s the boomerang effect that the condemner often doesn’t pause to consider.”

“It’s **one thing for Christians to believe that,**” I said. “It’s another thing to communicate it without **sounding smug or superior.** But Christians often come off that way.”

Zacharias sighed. “**Yes, if truth is not undergirded by love, it makes the possessor of that truth obnoxious & the truth repulsive,**” he said. “Having been raised in India & having all Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, & Sikh friends growing up, I can appreciate some of their criticisms of Christians. **Violence, antagonism, & hostility are contrary to the love of Christ.** One cannot communicate the love of Christ in non-loving terms.

“In India we have a proverb that says once you cut off a person’s nose, there’s no point in giving him a rose to smell,” he continued. “And if a Christian’s arrogance turns off somebody, that person won’t be receptive to the Christian message. Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘I like their Christ, I don’t like their Christians.’ Friedrich Nietzsche said, ‘I will believe in the Redeemer when the Christian looks a little more redeemed.’ Their points need to be taken.

“**However,**” he added, “**it is possible to lovingly claim exclusive truth, just as a scientist can very gently say, ‘This is the second law of thermodynamics’ without adding, ‘Now, can we vote on how many of us can cooperate with it or not?’**”

“So the criticism of Christians is often valid?”

“Yes, **sometimes we have run afoul of cultural sensitivities.** At the same time, however, Eastern religions have a lot of soul-searching to do in this regard today. Clannish & political conflicts aside, I know of **no Christianized country where your life is in danger because you are from another faith. But today there are many countries in the world—**such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, & Iran—where to become a follower of Christ is to put your life & your family at risk.

“Even the One Whose life was most perfectly lived ended up on a cross,” Zacharias noted. “Resistance to truth can be so strong that it can still engender violence & hate even when the person has done absolutely nothing wrong.

### **Origin, Meaning, Morality, Destiny**

Anyone can claim to be the only path to God. **In fact, quite a few crackpots have made that assertion** throughout history. The real issue is why anybody should believe Jesus was telling the truth when He said it.

“On what basis do you believe this claim by Jesus is true?” I asked Zacharias.

“Ah, yes, that is the heart of the question,” he replied, his head nodding. “On one hand, you can say that the resurrection of Jesus established Him as being the **Son of God. If that’s true, then all other faith systems cannot be true, because they each assert something contrary to His divinity.** And of course, the historical record concerning the Resurrection is extremely compelling.

“**On the other hand, you can approach this issue by looking at the 4 fundamental questions that every religion seeks to answer: Origin, meaning, morality, & destiny.** I believe that only the answers of Jesus Christ correspond to reality. There is a coherence among His answers unlike those of any other religion.”

“Can you back that up with examples of how other faiths fail those tests?”

“Consider Buddhism,” he replied. “**Buddha’s answer on the question of morality does not cohere with his answer concerning origins.** You see, Buddhism is technically nontheistic, if not atheistic. But if there was

no Creator, from where does one arrive at a moral law? Or consider the Hindu version of reincarnation. If every birth is a rebirth, & if every life pays for the previous life, then what were you paying for in your first birth? You see—incoherence dominates.

“Even Gandhi said that if he had his way he would expunge some of the scriptures from Hinduism, because they are so contradictory with each other. By contrast, Jesus provides answers to these 4 fundamental questions of life in a way that corresponds with reality & has internal consistency, unlike any other faith system.

“Concerning origins, the Bible says we are not identical with God—contrary to the Hindu claim—but we are distinct from Him. In other words, we didn’t bring ourselves into being, but we are a creation of God. Since we were created in His image, this accounts for human beings having a moral point of reference. No system is able to explain this except the monotheistic ones.

“Also, Christianity says we rejected the divine will. The tempter in the Garden said if you eat this fruit, you will become as gods, knowing good & evil. The implication is that you become the definer of good & evil. Humanism was born right there; man became the measure of all things. This willful rebellion & rejection of God corresponds to reality. As Malcolm Muggeridge said, human depravity is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but also the most philosophically resistant.

“Next, the issue of meaning. Here again, the Christian faith stands without parallel. The simplest way to describe it is that God does not call us to meaning by asking us to be good people. He does not call us to meaning just by telling us to love one another. It is only in the experience of worship that meaning comes to be. The Bible tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, & mind, & only when we’ve done that can we begin to love our neighbors as ourselves. This also corresponds to experience.

“Next, Christianity says morality is not culturally based, but instead it grows out of the very character of God. Otherwise, you end up with the dilemma from philosophy of old: is the moral law over & above you, or is a moral law subject to you? If it is over & above you, where do you find its root, then? The only way to explain that is to find it in an eternal, moral, omnipotent, infinite God. Thus, Christianity explains morality in a coherent manner.

“Finally, destiny is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the historical event that proved His divinity & that opened the door to Heaven for everyone who will follow Him. Where else do you have anything that comes close to claiming this?

“Billy Graham once told of meeting Konrad Adenauer, the mayor of Cologne who was imprisoned by Hitler for opposing the Nazi regime & who later became the highly regarded chancellor of West Germany from 1949-63. Adenauer looked Graham in the eyes & asked, ‘Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead?’ Graham said, ‘Of course I do.’ To which Adenauer replied: ‘Mr. Graham, outside of the resurrection of Jesus, I do not know of any other hope for this world.’

“He was right. Because the Resurrection is an actual historical event, we can be forgiven, we can be reconciled with God, we can spend eternity with Him, & we can trust Jesus’ teachings as being from God.

“One of my friends was a Muslim convert who was later martyred. I remember visiting him in the hospital after his legs had been blown off, & he said: ‘The more I understand of what others have claimed & taught, the more beautiful Jesus Christ looks to me.’ I’ve never forgotten that, & I believe that to be absolutely true.

“No man spoke like Jesus. No one ever answered the questions the way He answered them. Existentially, we can test it out. Empirically, we can test it out. The Bible is not just a book of mysticism or spirituality; it is a book that also gives geographical truths & historical truths. If you’re an honest skeptic, it’s not just calling you to a feeling; it’s calling you to a real Person. That’s why the Apostle Peter said, ‘We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power & coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.’

“He’s saying, ‘This is true. This is reality. This can be trusted.’ And, yes, this truth excludes that which is contrary.”

## Of Elephants & Faith

“Some people say that when you strip away everything, all the world religions are essentially teaching the universal fatherhood of God & the universal brotherhood of humankind,” I said. “That would mean that all the world’s faith systems are equally valid.”

Zacharias shook his head. “Only someone who doesn’t understand the world religions would claim they basically teach the same thing,” he said.

“What do they mean by the universal fatherhood of God when Buddhism doesn’t even claim that there is a God? What do we mean by the fatherhood of God when Shankara, one of the most respected Hindu philosophers, said theism is only a child’s way to ultimately get to the top, where you find out God is not distinct from you? What then does the fatherhood of God mean? It’s an illusion. This fatherhood of God is not a trans-religious doctrine.

“Secondly, the brotherhood of humanity—yes, we are brothers & sisters as fellow human beings, but the only reason we are is because we have been fashioned by God. Once you take that foundation away,” he said with a chuckle, “then **brotherhood ends up with more hoods than brothers!** In sum, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, & Christianity are not saying the same thing. They are **distinct & mutually exclusive** religious doctrines. **They all cannot be true at the same time.**

“I will say this: there are aspects of truth in virtually all of the major religions. They contain some great thoughts & ideas. But it’s **not** like we are blind people exploring the elephant, with one person feeling the leg & thinking it’s a tree; the other person feeling the trunk & thinking it’s a rope; & the third feeling the ear & thinking it’s a fan.

“The point is,” he said, his voice rising for emphasis, “the parable has already given away the fact that **this, indeed, is an elephant!** The blind man may tell you it’s a tree, but he’s wrong. It is not a tree or a rope or a fan. The seeing man knows this is an elephant. He knows the truth; his sight has revealed it to him. And Jesus Christ has made it clear that the eternal truths of God may be known. Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of the gospel—in Him, all of truth came together. So while there may be aspects of truth elsewhere, the sum total of truth is in Christ.

“In the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, & the Word was God.... The Word became flesh & made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One & Only, Who came from the Father, full of grace & truth.”

## Redemption, Righteousness, Worship

Comedian Quentin Crisp once said: “**When I told the people of Northern Ireland that I was an atheist, a woman in the audience stood up & said, ‘Yes, but is it the God of the Catholics or the God of the Protestants in Whom you don’t believe?’**”

His humor was actually a sad commentary on the depth of sectarian strife in that land. Through the centuries, the world has seen plenty of acrimony & violence over differences in the way people view God. **Disgusted by religious bickering, some people have thrown up their hands & said the world would be a much better place if people simply stopped arguing over doctrinal disputes & instead focused on living in peace with each other.**

“There are moral-living Muslims, Jews, Christians, Mormons, & Hindus,” I pointed out to Zacharias. “**Isn’t how a person lives & treats his neighbor more important than what he believes theologically?**”

“How a person lives & how he treats his neighbor is very important,” came his reply. “**But it is not more important than what he believes, because the way he lives is reflective of what he believes. Regardless of whether he has ever signed a doctrinal statement, what he really & truly believes is what he will ultimately live out. But this question makes the assumption that morality is what life is all about.**”

“If life isn’t about being moral,” I said, “then what is it about?”

“**Jesus Christ didn’t come into this world to make bad people good,**” he said. “**He came into this world to make dead people live.** He came so that those who are dead to God can come alive to God. If this life were only about morality, then how you live would be the most important thing, although it would still be



connected to what you believe. But that misunderstands the Christian concept, which is no matter how well we live, we cannot live up to the standard & character of God.

“The word ‘sin’ means missing the mark. And if that is a correct definition, then the grace of God becomes the most important truth. **Apart from Him, we cannot even believe what is right, let alone live the right way.**”

“So, yes, living kindly & morally good lives is important. But **philosophers from Socrates, Plato, & Aristotle, all the way to the Enlightenment thinkers like Immanuel Kant were unable to even define what morality is.** Ultimately, they could only give us what morality did for society. So I believe goodness or badness is the wrong starting point; life & death, spiritually, is where you begin.”

“But as you conceded, it is important how people live,” I said. “People say Gandhi lived a more virtuous life than most Christians. Why should he be sent to Hell just because he wasn’t a follower of Jesus?”

“First & foremost, it’s important to know that no human being consigns anybody to Heaven or Hell. **In fact, God Himself does not send anybody to Heaven or to Hell;** the person chooses to respond to the grace of God or to reject the grace of God, although even that decision is enabled by His grace.

“Second, Abraham asked God in the case of Sodom & Gomorrah whether He was going to let the righteous die with the unrighteous, & it was wonderful how Abraham answered his own question. He said, ‘Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ This means we can be absolutely confident that whatever God does in the case of Gandhi or any other person, He will do what is right.”

“Gandhi didn’t follow Jesus,” I said, “so I suppose you would say he was not redeemed.”

“That is something that will be determined by God,” Zacharias replied.

“**Isn’t it unfair to condemn people when they never heard** about Jesus & merely followed the religious traditions of their parents?” I asked.

“**God knows where we will be born & raised, & He puts us in a position where we might seek Him.** We are **clearly told that wherever we live—in whatever culture, in whatever nation—He is within reach of every one of us.** There is always the possibility of a person crying out on their knees, ‘God, help me,’ & if that happens there are ways in which God can minister to them that are beyond our understanding.”

“For example?”

“For example, He might send someone to share the gospel with them. Or let me tell you what happened in the case of a Muslim woman who worked for a very well-known institution in her country. She told me how she was leaving her office at the end of her day’s work & was very unhappy in her heart. As she was walking, she muttered, ‘I don’t know why I am so empty,’ & after that, out of the blue, she said, ‘Jesus, can You help me?’ She stopped on the sidewalk & said to herself, ‘Why did I name Him?’ Well, that woman ended up becoming a Christian.

“In her case, I think God saw a heart that hungered for Him but did not know how to reach Him in the cloister of her existence. I think this was God breaking past the barriers of her environment because she was already breaking through the barriers of her inner life, seeking after Him. Thus, God can reach into any cultural situation in response to anyone who wants to know Him.

“Another way of looking at this issue comes from Romans, where Paul says **God’s infinite power & deity are revealed to everyone through Creation. Then Paul says God put the law in our hearts & our consciences that we might seek after Him.** And he talks about the Word of Christ that is necessary for a person to come to know Him. I think more & more that this Word of Christ comes within the framework of different cultures.

“I have spoken in many Islamic countries, where it’s tough to talk about Jesus. **Virtually every Muslim who has come to follow Christ has done so, first, because of the love of Christ expressed through a Christian, or second, because of a vision, a dream, or some other supernatural intervention.** Now, **no religion has a more intricate doctrine of angels & visions than Islam,** & I think it’s extraordinary that God uses that sensitivity to the supernatural world in which He speaks in visions & dreams & reveals Himself.

“**One of India’s greatest converts was a Sikh, Sundar Singh, who came to know Christ through an**

appearance of Christ in his room in a dream one night. It had a tremendous impact on his life & he became a Christian. So there are ways that God can reveal Himself that go far beyond our own understanding.

“Now, if God is able to give the Word of Christ in various settings in ways we can’t even understand—if He’s not far from us wherever we are, if He is able to speak through the general revelation of Creation & through our conscience—then we have to accept the fact that we are without excuse. Every human being will know enough truth so that if they respond to that known truth, God will reveal more to them.”

I tried to summarize his point. “You’re saying that regardless of where a person lives in the world, regardless of the culture in which they live, anyone who responds to the understanding that they do have & sincerely seeks God will in some way be given an opportunity to respond to Him?”

As I spoke, Zacharias was weighing my words with care. “I believe so,” he replied. “I believe that if a person genuinely & sincerely seeks after Him, there will be some way God makes available for that person to hear of Him.”

I was curious about what prompted Zacharias to respond positively to the message of Jesus. “Tell me a bit of your story,” I said.

“In India, you are what you are born into,” he began. “My father & mother were nominal Christians; in fact, the reason they were Christians was simply because they were not Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus. I don’t recall ever hearing the Gospel preached at my church, which was very liberal-minded.

“I came to believe in Jesus in 2 stages. The first stage was when I heard the Gospel publicly proclaimed in an auditorium when I was 17. I said to myself, ‘Something about this is true & I want it.’ I went forward & was counseled, but I did not really understand.

“At the time, I was under a lot of pressure in a culture where academic performance was of supreme importance. If you’re not at the top of the class, then you’re not going to succeed. I couldn’t cope with it. I also had a very strict father, & I struggled with that. I took a lot of punishment physically.

“So a few months later, I decided to end my own life. I was not depressed; my friends would have been shocked to hear suicide was on my mind. But for me, life had no meaning or purpose. I went to school one day & used the keys to the science lab to check out some poisons. I put them into a glass of water, gobbled it up, & collapsed on my knees.

“My servant in the house rushed me to the hospital; if he were not there, I would be dead,” he continued. “They emptied all of the poisons out of me. As I lay in bed, a friend walked in with a New Testament & showed me John chapter 14. I couldn’t hold the book; my body was too dehydrated. My mother had to read it to me.

“There she was, reading where Jesus was talking to Thomas & saying, ‘I am the Way, the Truth, & the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’ Then she came to verse 18, where Jesus tells His disciples, ‘Because I live, you also will live.’

“That verse touched my soul. I said in a prayer, ‘Jesus, I don’t know much about Who You are, but You are telling me You’re the Author of true life.’ I didn’t understand the concept of sin. But what I did understand was that He was offering Himself to me to give me life.

“So I said, ‘If You take me out of this hospital room, I will leave no stone unturned in my pursuit of truth.’ And I walked out of that room 5 days later an absolutely brand new man. I began to study the Bible, & it dramatically changed my life. My brothers then came to follow Jesus, as did my parents before they died.

“But it was in that hospital room where Christ told me—through nobody explaining it to me—that He could give me what life was really meant to be. And I’ve never looked back. Years of study have only confirmed my decision to follow Him. I took some philosophy courses at Cambridge under a renowned atheist, & I remember thinking in astonishment, ‘These are the best arguments atheists have?’ It merely confirmed the truth of Scripture.”

“You deal with a lot of spiritual seekers now,” I said. “What do you tell them?”

“The Bible says, ‘You will seek Me & find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. Think about that—that’s an amazing Promise. I encourage them to bring their heart & mind into a receptive mode & to

not spare their intellect in testing the truth of the Bible. For any genuine person who brings an unprejudiced view, I don't see how he or she can walk away except saying there is nothing like this on the face of the earth.

“I have traveled the world. I have searched high & low. I have found nothing that satisfies my mind, my heart, & the deepest longings of my soul like Jesus does. He is not only the Way, the Truth, & the Life; He is personal to me. He is *my way*, & *my truth*, & *my life*—just as He can be for anyone who reaches out to Him.

“Because remember what Paul told the Athenians: ‘He is not far,’ he said, ‘from each one of us.’”

### **OBJECTION: CHURCH HISTORY IS LITTERED WITH OPPRESSION & VIOLENCE**

Wayne W. Olson was *always the life of the party. An imposing, avuncular judge, with pale blue eyes & a crown of white hair, Olson would regale everyone with side-splitting stories from his often-bizarre experiences* at Cook County Criminal Court. He had a *keen wit & the backslapping friendliness* of an old-time Chicago alderman.

Olson *especially liked to see his name in the paper*, so he would frequently slip me stories when I was the *Chicago Tribune's* reporter at the Criminal Courts Building on Chicago's West Side.

At the end of the day, sometimes we would lounge around his chambers & swap jokes. Occasionally we'd have some laughs over drinks at Jean's, a popular hangout down the block, where he would entertain everyone with stories about how he worked his way through law school as a drummer in a polka band. An *inveterate extrovert, he couldn't stand to be alone.*

As a narcotics judge hearing routine criminal cases, Olson wasn't in a position to pave any new judicial paths. At least, not on purpose. However, on *Thanksgiving weekend of 1980, Olson unwittingly became entangled in an incident that was unprecedented in American jurisprudence.*

After Olson had driven away from the courthouse, anticipating a restful 4-day vacation, a team of FBI agents surreptitiously broke into his darkened chambers & planted a judicially approved listening device. This marked the first time in U.S. history that federal investigators had bugged the chambers of a sitting judge—an honor that Olson, had he known, would have gladly relinquished to someone else.

Terrence Hake, the prosecutor assigned to work in Olson's courtroom, *actually was an undercover agent who was part of a clandestine government investigation* called “Operation Greylord.” After Olson returned from the holiday, whenever anyone under surveillance would walk into his chambers, Hake would use a hidden transmitter to send a coded message to an FBI agent stationed in a car parked outside. The agent would then signal another investigator to activate the bug so that agents could eavesdrop on what transpired behind the closed doors.

In all, more than *250 hours of conversations were secretly recorded—and they confirmed government suspicions that the judge had been leading a double life. The likable, easygoing Olson turned out to be thoroughly corrupt, selling justice to the highest bidder.*

I had already left the *Tribune* to edit another newspaper when the stunning news broke: Olson had been *indicted on 55 counts of bribery, extortion, & racketeering.* I shook my head. *He had deceived me, his colleagues, & the public for so many years. I felt betrayed & angered over his trashing of the very laws he had sworn to uphold.* It was an incredible reversal of fortune—the *judge who had once presided so regally over the fate of others now found himself sentenced to 12 years in a federal penitentiary.*

And he didn't go to prison alone. *Dozens of other crooked judges & lawyers also found themselves swept up in the net* of Operation Greylord, the most successful undercover probe in the history of the Cook County court system—and an investigation which raised questions that, by analogy, also are relevant to Christianity.

## Corrupt to the Core?

One of the issues that surfaced through Operation Greylord was this: when the history of Chicago is written, will the crimes of Wayne Olson & other corrupt court officials be seen as anomalies in an otherwise honest system of justice? In other words, is the criminal justice apparatus fundamentally untainted & impartial except for those rare blemishes that have occurred when a rogue judge has tried to cash in for himself?

Or are Olson & his cronies symptomatic of widespread & systematic corruption that has corroded the very DNA of justice in Cook County? Is the [court system compromised to its core by extortion & favoritism, so that Olson's case was actually a window into "business as usual" among the local judiciary?](#)

Essentially these [same questions could be asked about Christianity. Christians tend to see the instances of church abuse & violence through the centuries as anomalies in an otherwise positive institution. Critics, however, are more apt to see travesties like the Crusades, the Inquisition, & the Salem witch trials as illustrative of a deeper problem: that Christianity itself is tainted to its core by a power-hungry desire to impose its will on others.](#)

Certainly the atrocities committed in the name of Jesus have been lightning rods for opponents to the faith. Said Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg: ["With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things & evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."](#)

Charles Templeton's distaste for much of what has happened through churches was evident in our conversation as well as in his writings. While conceding that organized religion has done "immeasurable good," he charged that it "has seldom been at its best. [Too often it has been a negative influence.... Across the centuries & on every continent, Christians—the followers of the Prince of Peace—have been the cause of & involved in strife.](#)" For example, he likened the church during the Middle Ages to "a terrorist organization."

Is that assessment warranted by the historical data? Fortunately I didn't have to travel very far to get some answers. One of Christianity's leading historians lived less than an hour from my home when I resided in suburban Chicago.

## INTERVIEW: JOHN D. WOODBRIDGE, PH.D.

After receiving his [master's degree in history](#) from Michigan State University, the [bilingual](#) Woodbridge earned his [doctorate at the University of Toulouse](#) in France. He has received a [Fulbright Fellowship & grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities & the American Council of Learned Societies, & has taught at a number of secular universities. Currently, he is a research professor of church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School](#) in Deerfield, Illinois.

When I met Woodbridge at his home, I decided there was no way to ease into our discussion. Although our interview took place a few months before Pope John Paul II made his historic public confession & asked God's forgiveness for sins committed or condoned by the Roman Catholic Church during the last 2 millennia, I pulled out a newspaper clipping about an earlier admission by the Pope & pointed to it as I posed my first challenge.

## Confessing the Church's Sins

"As far back as 1994," I began, "Pope John Paul II called upon the church to acknowledge 'the dark side of its history' & said: ['How can one remain silent about the many forms of violence perpetrated in the name of the faith—wars of religion, tribunals of the Inquisition & other forms of violations of the rights of persons?'](#) Isn't it true that the church through the centuries has intentionally glossed over these instances of abuse?"

"I think the Pope's statement is courageous," he replied, "because he is acknowledging that the Roman Catholic Church has glossed over some things that have been done in the name of Christ & which are obviously fodder for criticism of Christianity in general.

"I would quickly add, though, that we should be careful in using the expression 'the church,' because

that gives the impression that there has only been one representative institution of Christianity. I would make a **clear line of demarcation between people who are part of ‘the church’—people who are the sheep who hear the shepherd’s voice & would be true Christians—and the institutional churches,**” he said, emphasizing the plural of that last word.

“Now, obviously,” he added, “there are many, many true Christians who are in the visible churches, but **just because a person is part of a church doesn’t necessarily mean he or she is a follower of Jesus.** Some people are *cultural* Christians but not *authentic* Christians.”

“Isn’t that a bit of 21<sup>st</sup>-century revisionism?” I asked. “That makes it rather easy to look back & say that all of the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity were actually perpetrated by those who said they were Christians but who really weren’t. That seems like a convenient escape hatch.”

“Oh, no, this distinction isn’t new,” he insisted. “In fact, it goes back to Jesus Himself.” He reached for his Bible & read the Words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father Who is in Heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your Name, & in Your Name drive out demons & perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!’”

Looking up from the book, Woodbridge said, “So Jesus talked about this distinction 2 millennia ago. And certainly through the centuries much has been done in the name of Christianity that does not reflect His teachings.

“For example, Adolph Hitler tried to color his movement as being Christian, but obviously he didn’t represent what Jesus stood for. When theologian Karl Barth was asked to begin a lecture in Germany by saying, ‘Heil Hitler,’ he replied, ‘It’s pretty hard to say, ‘Heil Hitler’ just before you’re studying the Sermon on the Mount!’ Those 2 things just don’t go together. So if we accept this distinction, then we can more accurately analyze some of the things that have been attributed to the Christian faith.”

I remained dubious. “So you’re saying that if something bad was done in history, it couldn’t have been committed by authentic Christians?”

“No, no, I’m not suggesting that,” Woodbridge replied. “The Bible makes it clear that because of our sinful nature, we continue to do things as Christians that we shouldn’t. We’re not perfect in this world. And unfortunately, some of the evil deeds committed through history have, indeed, been committed by Christians. When that has happened, they’ve acted contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

“At the same time, we should recognize that there has often been a minority voice that has spoken out against abuses that some institutional churches have perpetrated. **For instance, I was just reading this morning that during Spain’s colonization of Latin America, there were Roman Catholics who were appalled at how native peoples were being exploited for economic purposes in the name of Christ.** They said, ‘No, you can’t do that!’ These Christians were willing to speak out against abuses by representatives of the state or church.”

“As a historian, can you see why skeptics seize upon the abuses from church history as arguments against Christianity or as a way to attack the faith?”

“Oh, I can understand that,” he replied. “Unfortunately, certain incidents in history have created cynicism in some people toward Christianity. At the same time, there are **a number of misleading stereotypes about what Christians have & haven’t done.** Some critics have attacked a cultural Christianity, failing to grasp that it is not an authentic Christianity.

“This has been one of our problems for centuries. **Voltaire was a major critic of Christianity, yet when he went to England he ran into some Quakers & Presbyterian Christians & was very impressed by their faith. So there can be an institutional form of Christianity that sometimes repels people, while authentic expressions of faith can be quite attractive when non-Christians encounter them.**”

## Why Christianity Spread

Historians have long marveled at—and theorized about the amazing speed with which Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire despite brutal persecution. I asked Woodbridge to assess the comments made by atheist-turned-Christian Patrick Glynn:

Part of the reason for Christianity's rapid spread, historians have remarked, was simply that the early Christians were such nice people. The very kindness of the Christians & their service to the poor & downtrodden attracted new adherents. "Christians astounded the ancients with their charity," as one historian has put it.

Woodbridge nodded in response. "Yes, I think Glynn's reference to the rapid spread of Christianity is accurate," he said. "Tertullian writes at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, 'We are but of yesterday & yet we already fill your cities, your palace, senate & forum, we have left to you only your temples.' So in 150 years, Christianity spread very, very quickly.

"One explanation of its rapid spread, as Glynn indicated, is that many Christians were not just taking care of their own, but they were caring for neighbors, the poor, & widows, the hurting, & they were basically very loving. They showed compassion toward children, who were often treated very callously by the Romans & Greeks at birth, especially baby girls. The lifestyle of Christians matched their teachings, so that many early Christians were not afraid to say, 'Imitate us as we imitate Christ.'"

Having said that, Woodbridge added a bit sheepishly: "Unfortunately, in contemporary evangelicalism sometimes people say, 'Don't look at us, look at Christ,' because we are worried what people will find if our own lives are scrutinized. That wasn't true of many of these early Christians—there was consistency between their beliefs & behavior."

Woodbridge pulled out a piece of paper. "We can also gain some insights into why Christianity grew so quickly from a few early non-Christians," he said, reading aloud the observations of Lucian, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Greek satirist & critic of Christianity:

These misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death & voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; & then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, & deny the gods of Greece, & worship the crucified sage, & live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property.

"He's confirming the fact that Christians **treated each other as brothers & freely shared their possessions with each other**. Add to that another important factor to which he alludes: Christians believed that to die is to be with Christ. Justin Martyr, in the *First Apology*, says: 'You can kill us, but you can't hurt us.' Most of us think killing is a big-time hurt, but from their point of view, being killed doesn't matter too much. As Paul said, 'To live is Christ & to die is gain.'

"So when you take into consideration the early Christians' fearless devotion to the faith; their willingness to testify through their own martyrdom to the truth of Christ; their humble & compassionate lifestyle; their care for each other & the helpless & hurting & disenfranchised in the community; their commitment to prayer; & their empowerment by the Holy Spirit, you can begin to understand why the faith spread so rapidly."

"Ultimately," I asked, "was it a good or bad thing for Christianity that it was adopted as the state religion of the Romans?"

"On one hand, it was very nice to have the persecutions cease, so that was a good thing," Woodbridge said with a smile. "But as the church became closely related to the state, then the church began to use the state as a persecuting agency, & that became a very bad thing. Also, Worldliness swept into the church."

"How so?" I asked.

“The rumor was abroad that Constantine promised if you became a Christian, you’d get a beautiful robe & pieces of gold. Well, those aren’t very good reasons to become a Christian. So the door was opened wide to persons who may have professed Christianity, but who didn’t really embrace Jesus.”

“In other words, cultural Christians rather than authentic followers of Jesus?”

“Exactly,” he said.

### **Sin #1: The Crusades**

“Let’s skip ahead,” I said to Woodbridge. “Christian crusaders tried for 2 centuries to expel the Muslims from the Holy Land.” I opened a history book & paged through it until I found the right entry. “One horrific account described the Crusaders’ entry into Jerusalem in the First Crusade this way,” I said, reading the following description from an eyewitness:

Some of our men ... cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames.... It was necessary to pick one’s way over the bodies of men & horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon (where) ... men rode in blood up to their knees & bridle reins. Indeed it was a just & splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies.

Slamming the book shut with disgust, I looked hard at Woodbridge & asked in a voice laden with sarcasm: “Do you agree that the Crusades were ‘just & splendid?’”

Woodbridge pursed his lips. “That kind of bloodshed is repugnant & abhorrent,” he said firmly. “Did it happen? Yes, it did. Is it heartbreaking to contemplate? Yes, it is. I’m not going to try to excuse it or rationalize it away. However, your question—were the Crusades just or not—demands an either-or answer, & I think it might be more helpful to provide a little broader context.”

I sat back in my chair. “Go ahead,” I said.

“Pope Urban II launched the first crusade in 1095, when he gave a very famous sermon & the crowds responded by declaring, ‘God wills it!’” Woodbridge began. “The Crusades continued until the loss of the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land in 1291, when a town called Acre was taken over once again by Muslims. Jerusalem was back in the hands of the Muslims by 1187.”

“The Pope called upon barons & others to go to the Holy Land & retrieve it from the Muslims who were occupying it & who were thought to be the foes of Christ. So if we put ourselves back into the shoes of those early crusaders, we can understand that they thought they were doing something magnificent for Christ. But when you study the details of what actually happened, you become deeply troubled. In fact, in one Crusade, the Fourth, the participants didn’t even make it to the Holy Land. They got as far as Constantinople, seized it, & set up their own kingdom. Tremendous bloodshed ensued. Western ‘Christians’ killed Eastern Christians.

“In addition to the violence, another major problem was the motivation of some who went. In 1215, Pope Innocence III actually instructed people that if they went on the Crusades, this could earn their salvation. And if they sent someone to fight in their place, this, too, would earn their salvation. This counsel was an obvious distortion of true Christianity. It makes a mockery of the teachings of the Bible & can’t in any way be squared with historic Christian beliefs. All in all, it’s fair to say that despite anyone’s intentions, the general avarice & slaughter associated with the Crusades have created an ugly stain on the reputation of the Christian faith.

“And that’s not just a liberal, 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective. In the early part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a number of Christians were saying the same thing. One reason why the crusading ideal disintegrated was due to the enormous travesties associated with the Crusades. Popes tried in later centuries to launch crusades, but they couldn’t gain political & popular support. The genuine discrepancy between authentic Christianity & the reporting of what the Crusades had been like contributed to this loss of interest or enthusiasm for new

crusades.

“This takes us back to the distinction between things done in the name of Christ & those things that really represent Jesus’ teachings. When you try to mesh Jesus’ teachings with the slaughter of the Crusades—well, there’s no way they can be reconciled.”

I asked: “What do you say to a non-Christian who says the Crusades just show that Christians want to oppress others & are as violent as anybody else is?”

Woodbridge pondered the question for a moment before answering. “I would say that there is some truth in that statement as it relates to the Crusades,” he began. “There have been people who have done things in the name of Christ they never should have done. Then I would point out that not everything done in the name of Christ should, in point of fact, be attributed to Christianity.

“But I would not try to dodge the point that terrible things occurred during the Crusades. They need to be confessed as being totally contrary to the teachings of the one the crusaders were supposedly following. It’s important to remember that it’s not Jesus’ teachings that are at fault here; it’s the actions of those who, for whatever reason, greatly strayed from what he clearly taught: we are to love our enemies.

“Nobody was more outspoken against hypocrisy or cruelty than Jesus. Consequently, if critics believe that aspects of the Crusades should be denounced as hypocritical & violent—well, they’d have an ally in Christ. They’d be agreeing with him.”

### **Sin #2: The Inquisition**

The **Inquisition began in 1163 when Pope Alexander III** instructed bishops to discover evidence of heresy & take action against the heretics. What developed was a **campaign of terror, with secret proceedings**, supreme authority vested in the inquisitor, & a **complete lack of due process**, where the accused didn’t know the names of their accusers, there was no defense attorney, & **torture was used to extract confessions**. **Those who refused to repent were turned over to the government to be burned at the stake**.

“How could authentic Christians participate in such atrocities?” I asked.

“I think that the Inquisition is a tragedy that Christians cannot run away from. But I don’t think that it’s representative of the history of the Christian churches. **For much of their existence, many Christian churches have been in a minority situation & therefore not even in a position to persecute anyone**. In fact, talk about persecution—**millions of Christians themselves have been victims of brutal persecution through the ages, continuing to the present day** in some places. In fact, there have been apparently **more Christian martyrs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in any other**. To this very day, Christians are being killed for their faith around the world. So, no, the Inquisition is by far an exception in church history, not the norm.”

Woodbridge’s remarks reminded me of a magazine column about Christians being on the receiving end of persecution. While most people think of the average Christian today as being a US resident living far away from any danger for their faith, journalist David Neff set the record straight.

“The typical Christian,” he said, “lives in a developing country, speaks a non-European language, & exists under the constant threat of persecution—of murder, imprisonment, torture, or rape.”

### **Sin #3: The Salem Witch Trials**

The Salem witch trials at the end of the 1600s are frequently cited as a kind of Christian hysteria. In all, **19 people were hanged & one was pressed to death for refusing to testify**.

“Isn’t this another example of how Christian beliefs can result in the trampling of the rights of others?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s an example—if, in point of fact, true Christianity is involved here. When you unpack the episodes leading to the trials, you see there are many factors that precipitated them. There are issues related to **people scheming to get land from other** people; there are **issues related to hysteria**; there are **issues of believing in astral appearances, whereby people testify that somebody did something even when they were in another place**. When you study the **legal context** for the trials, there are variables that take you into issues unrelated to Christianity.”



“Are you saying the churches were innocent?”

“Life is more complex than just saying ‘Christianity’ was responsible. Although [there were witch trials in Europe, this was an aberration, not part of a bigger pattern in the colonies. You have to question the psychological equilibrium of some of the people who were involved in the witch trials & consider their false reporting of things.](#)

“Again, we have to emphasize that the Salem witch trials [constituted a terrible episode. I’m not trying to downplay their seriousness. But historians recognize that the story line is considerably more complicated than merely blaming the churches.](#)”

“One of the presuppositions at the time was that witches exist,” I pointed out. “How about you? Do you believe there are witches?”

“Yes, I believe that they do exist,” he replied. “In fact, a number of years ago I was watching French TV when Robert Mandrou, a very distinguished historian, was proposing that once people become enlightened, they don’t believe in witches anymore. Then a woman called to say, ‘Mr. Mandrou, I’m very impressed by all you’ve said, but I just want to tell you that I’m a witch.’ And, indeed, witchcraft is practiced in France, the U.S., & elsewhere.

“[So part of the problem in dealing with the Salem witch trials is the assumption that all of this was totally hokum, that there’s no such thing as witches & witchcraft. The hardcore reality is that there are; even many non-Christians recognize that.](#)

“Does this excuse what happened at Salem? No, of course not. But [when you sort through the complexities, this situation can’t be simply written off as an example of Christianity having run amok. Life—& history—just aren’t that simple.](#)”

“What ended the trials?” I asked.

“This isn’t commonly known,” he said, “but it was a Christian who played the key role. [A Puritan leader named Increase Mather spoke out forcefully against what was happening](#) & that was the beginning of the end. Ironically, it was a Christian voice that silenced the madness.”

#### **Sin #4: Exploitation by Missionaries**

“The Missionaries arrive uninvited. Despite noble intentions, they are ignorant of the place where they set up shop & indifferent to the hearts & values of the people they have come to help. They meddle in things which are none of their business. They assume that the natives’ traditional spirituality is defective, even devilish. They [bribe or coerce the people to abandon their traditional ways](#) until, in the process of trying to ‘save’ the people, the Missionaries wind up destroying them.”

I read that accusation to Woodbridge, following it with these questions: “Haven’t Missionaries through history contributed to the demise of native cultures? Haven’t they ended up exploiting the very people they claimed they wanted to help? On balance, haven’t Missionaries done more harm than good?”

This [issue struck close to home for Woodbridge, whose family has a long tradition of serving on the Mission Field. But he didn’t seem to take the challenge personally, responding instead with his characteristic even-handedness & balance.](#)

“Let me start with the Spanish incursion into Latin America as an example, because it illustrates how complicated this issue can become,” he said.

When I nodded my assent, he continued. “Was there exploitation & abuse of native people there? Yes, unfortunately, there was. But was this the result of the Missionaries? Well, history tells us that the Missionary movement was often associated with an economic policy of the colonial powers known as *mercantilism*.”

“Could you define that?”

“[Mercantilism was the belief that the country with the most gold would be the most powerful.](#) The political balance of power in Europe was thought to be in part determined by which country successfully explored Latin America & elsewhere. As a result, mercantilist motivations became mixed with Missionary enterprises. It is, indeed, true that the Spanish did horrible things in Latin America, but much of it was

instigated by adventurers & mercantilist types while many Missionaries did praiseworthy things.”

Woodbridge opened a book that was sitting nearby. “In fact, historian Anthony Grafton of Princeton University talks about the valuable things that the Missionaries did,” he said, reading from the book *New Worlds, Ancient Text*:

The Roman church insisted on the humanity of the Indians, & large numbers of Missionaries—especially [idealistic mendicant friars](#) bent on bringing what they saw as the simple, incorrupt people of the New World to Christ—arrived. They built churches & religious communities.

“Now, Grafton is not an evangelical,” Woodbridge continued, “but he has carefully studied the Missionary movement & acknowledges the enormous amount of good that the Missionaries did. Unfortunately, Missionaries as a group get discussed as agents of mercantilism, & so they often get blamed for some of the horrible things the Spanish did in Latin America.

“And as I noted earlier, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century there were debates in Spain about whether what was going on in Latin America was Christian. There were major defenders of the Indians who insisted they shouldn’t be exploited. One key figure, Bartolome de Las Casas, was driven to his reforming attitude after reading a passage in Ecclesiasticus in the Roman Catholic Bible, which says: **‘The bread of the needy is their life. He that defraudeth him thereof is a man of blood.’** Having read this, he & other Roman Catholics opposed the malevolent things that were taking place in Latin America.”

His comments triggered my memory of seeing a statue outside the UN building in NYC a number of years earlier. Now I understood the background: [Francesco de Vitoria, the founder of international law, had been one of the theologians who had argued for the full dignity of the New World Indians & who had fearlessly opposed their exploitation at the Spanish Court.](#)

“So while it is indeed true that sometimes ‘Christian civilization’ has done some of the things you pointed out earlier, there have also been thousands of acts of charity that have been God-honoring. [The Catholic Church has an impressive record of taking care of the poor during the Middle Ages.](#) In California, their Missions all up the coast took care of people. When you read the journals of a number of Protestant Missionaries who went to other lands, it’s very difficult to come to the conclusion that they were self-consciously determined to oppress or destroy all aspects of native cultures.”

While Woodbridge’s answer was providing some context, I wanted to press him further for a more personal response. “Your family has included Missionaries,” I said. “What were their experiences?”

“Well, I’ve read the diary of [my grandfather, who was one of the earliest Protestant Missionaries to China.](#) I certainly didn’t get the sense that he was doing what you said earlier. Instead, he had a burning desire that the Chinese people come to know Christ, & he was very concerned about the poverty of the Chinese people & about some of their practices that were very detrimental to the humanity of individuals. He respected aspects of their culture & [wore a pigtail so that he would be accepted](#) by them.

“It has to be pointed out that sometimes the [critics of Missionaries have almost a Rousseauist idealism that native peoples were always happy & living perfect lives & that there was none of the demonic spiritism](#) going on in their cultures. But when you read the accounts of people going into certain regions, you see that some of these native people were in [dire physical & spiritual circumstances](#) & that the Missionaries greatly helped them.

“I’ve also read letters written by [my mother, who worked as a Missionary in Africa](#) when she was single. She would ride a motorcycle deep into the jungles, going from village to village. She [worked in a leper colony](#) taking care of the sick. She desired to show them the love of Christ & to serve them & to see them healed. She served even at great personal risk due to malaria & other dangers associated with living in a jungle.

“So, yes, sometimes there can be a transformation of a culture, but often that transformation brought about some good. When native people became Christians, they experienced the love & joy of Christ. That’s a wonderful thing. It’s when other motivations creep into the minds of those seeking to change a culture, like a

quest for economic gain or a twisted sense of racial superiority, that very bad things result.”

“Perhaps,” I observed, “some [critics of Missionaries see no value in the Christian message & therefore no benefit to the people who become followers of Jesus.](#)”

“Right!” he declared. “Often that’s the underlying presupposition. But if a person has the presupposition that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, then the gain to the various cultures of the world that hear the Gospel is incalculable.

“I have a colleague who is a leading African theologian. He’s had to battle the literature that says Christianity is a Western imperialist ideology bent on destroying African religions. His perspective is quite different. He sees the wonderful contributions that Christianity has made to African societies. It’s brought hope, it’s brought redemption, & countless Africans are very grateful for the Gospel. At the same time, he does not deny that the bearers of the Christian message sometimes did not live up to the teachings of Christ in their dealings with Africans.”

### **Sin #5: Anti-Semitism**

One of the ugliest blights on Christianity’s history has been anti-Semitism. Woodbridge readily conceded that, [regrettably, anti-Semitism has soiled Christian history.](#) The key question was why it happened in the first place.

“One factor was this: most Jews didn’t think Jesus was the Messiah. The Jews’ refusal to accept Him often transformed Jews in the minds of some Christians into foes of Christ,” he said. “Add to this that the Jews were thought to be responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion & you have 2 powerful components of ‘Christian’ anti-Semitism.”

That wasn’t sufficient for me. “There has to be more to it than that,” I insisted.

“Yes, I believe there is,” he replied. “Heiko Oberman, the distinguished historian at the University of Arizona, has tried to identify a number of the other factors. For example, by the time you get to the Middle Ages & the Reformation, there were abundant false rumors about Jews that even added more fuel to the anti-Semitic fires.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“That they had been involved with the [poisoning of wells](#) at the time of the [Black Death of 1348](#), that they [desecrated Christian sacraments](#) when they could, that they privately had sacrificial deaths, that they tampered with Christian Scriptures, & so forth.”

### **A Portrait of Christianity**

“Given all we’ve talked about,” I said, “what’s the bottom line? Is the world worse off or better off because of Christianity?”

Woodbridge [sat bolt upright](#) in his chair. “Better off,” he insisted. “No question about it. These are regrettable historical instances that shouldn’t be swept under the rug. We should apologize for them & efforts should be made to make sure they don’t recur. At the same time, though, the vast sweep of Christian history has been very beneficial to the world.”

“I suppose it’s easy in talking about the sins of Christians to forget the role of atheism in trampling human rights,” I observed. I took out a book & read Woodbridge some remarks by prominent Christian Luis Palau:

The [seismic shock of out-&-out atheism sent tidal waves across Europe & beyond, accounting directly for the annihilation & butchering of more than 100 million people this past century alone.](#) Humanity has paid a steep, gruesome price for the awful experiments in deliberate anti-theism carried out by Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung & others—each of whom was profoundly influenced by the writings of the apostles of atheism.... After watching atheism proliferate ... it’s [clearer than ever that ... without God, we’re lost.](#)

“I agree that without God, we’re lost,” Woodbridge responded. “That’s not to say an atheist could

never govern well. But given the [lack of framework in atheism for making moral decisions](#), it's easy to see why the world has experienced the horrors of these regimes. Where there's no absolute moral standard, raw power often wins."

"What would you say are the positive ways Christianity has contributed to civilization?"

"I see [Christianity's influence as a resplendent mural with many scenes, each depicted in bright, brilliant, & beautiful colors](#)," he said. "Without Christianity, there would be an awful lot of grays & only a few scattered & disconnected lines here & there giving any sense of meaning. But Christianity adds so much meaning, hope & beauty & richness to the picture."

Intrigued by the imagery, I asked, "What would the painting show?"

"The very center scene would portray the story of Jesus & His redemption for our sins. Finally, once & for all, He dealt with the issues of our guilt, our loneliness, & our alienation from God. Through His atoning death & resurrection, He opened up Heaven for everyone who follows Him. That's the greatest contribution Christianity ever could have made. It's summarized in Jn.3:16: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His one & only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal Life.'

"Also, Christianity provides us a revelation as to the meaning of life & the existence of universal morality. Without that revelation, it's very difficult to have any sense of what meaning is. You end up like Albert Camus, who said in the opening paragraph of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 'Why should I or anyone not commit suicide?' Well, Christianity explains why not. It gives us a frame of reference for living, for following a moral path, for relating to God & others in a healthy & deeply meaningful way.

"Brush strokes in the painting would depict scenes revealing vast humanitarian impulses that have been inspired by Christ's life & teaching. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants—all have been deeply involved in helping the poor, the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised. They've been willing to work against their own personal interests to serve others. Losing all of that—all the Missionary work, all the hospitals, all the homeless shelters, all the rehabilitation programs, all of the orphanages, all of the relief organizations, all the selfless feeding of the hungry & clothing of the poor & encouraging of the sick—would be a devastating blow to the world.

"In addition, the impact of Christian thought adds other scenes & gives shading & nuance & depth to the painting. Christians have given their minds to God, & their [literary, musical, architectural, scientific, & artistic contributions](#), if taken away, would render the world much more dull & shallow. Think of all the great educational institutions that Christians built, including Harvard, Yale, & Princeton, which were originally conceived & constructed to advance the Gospel.

"Finally, there's the power of the Holy Spirit that colors everything good. [Can you imagine what the world would be like if the Holy Spirit were withdrawn?](#) I mean, talk about your local horror show! It's bad enough the way things are now, but if the restraining power of the Holy Spirit were not here, then the horrible side of life would emerge even more graphically than it already does.

"I'm heartsick about the times when we, as Christians, have not lived according to Jesus' teachings & thereby created barriers to the faith. But I'm just so grateful for the nameless men & women who have humbly & courageously upheld the faith through the centuries, who have served in obscurity, who have given their lives to help others, who have left the world a far better place, & who have struggled to do the right thing despite incredible pressure to do otherwise.

"When I think of Christian history," he concluded, "they're the first to come to my mind. They're the heroes who are too often forgotten."

With a wistful smile, he gave them his greatest tribute: "They're what Jesus envisioned."

## **The Gifts of Christianity**

Woodbridge's impassioned words were still ringing in my mind when I arrived back home, [exhausted from a long day. I collapsed into my favorite chair & picked up a magazine to thumb through. There, quite by coincidence](#), I encountered an article in which several scholars, writing in the waning days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, speculated about where civilization would have been without Christianity. Their observations picked up right

where Woodbridge had left off.

Michael Novak extolled Christianity's gift of dignity. "Both Aristotle & Plato held that most humans are by nature slavish & suitable only for slavery," he wrote. "Most do not have natures worthy of freedom. The Greeks used 'dignity' for only the few, rather than for all human beings. By contrast, Christianity insisted that every single human is loved by the Creator, made in the Creator's image, & destined for eternal friendship & communion with Him." He pointed to the civilizing ideas of liberty, conscience, & truth that can be traced to Christianity.

David N. Livingstone, a professor in the School of Geosciences at the Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland, focused on Christianity's gift of science. "The idea that Christianity & science have constantly been at loggerheads is a gross distortion of the historical record," he wrote. "Indeed, Robert Boyle, the great English student of chemistry, believed that scientists more than anyone else glorified God in the pursuit of their tasks because it was given to them to interrogate God's Creation."

He pointed out that those in the Reformation "believed that God has revealed Himself to humanity in 2 ways—in Scripture & in nature. This enabled them to engage in the scientific investigation of the natural world." The results have been sweeping contributions by scientists who were spurred on by their Christian faith.

David Jeffrey, a professor of English literature at the University of Ottawa, described Christianity's gift of literacy. "It would hardly be too much to say that literary culture in Europe, much of Africa & the Americas is inseparable from the culturally transformative power of Christianity," he said. "In most of Europe, as in Africa, South America, & in many other parts of the world, the birth of literacy & literature essentially, not accidentally, coincides with the arrival of Christian Missionaries."

Perhaps most captivating, however, was historian Mark Noll's exploration of Christianity's gift of humility, a little-noted contribution that had special relevance in light of my discussions with Woodbridge about the ugly side of Christian history. Wrote Noll:

Over the long course of Christian history, the most depressing thing—because repeated so often—has been how tragically far short of Christian ideals we ordinary Christians so regularly fall. Over the long course of Christian history, the most remarkable thing—because it is such a miracle of grace—is how often believers have acted against the pride of life to honor Christ. Of all such "signs of contradiction," the most completely Christlike have been those occasions when believers who are strong—because of wealth, education, political power, superior culture, or favored location—have reached out to the despised, the forsaken, the abandoned, the lost, the insignificant, or the powerless.

Power, he said, nurtures the idolatry of self. It corrupts & almost never apologizes. But then Noll went on to recount several episodes through history in which powerful people, in whole or in part because of their Christian faith, willingly humbled themselves in public repentance for their abuse of power—an enduring & countercultural testimony to the power of the Gospel.

One story particularly piqued my interest because it concerned an obscure but illuminating incident at the conclusion of an episode that Woodbridge & I had discussed: the Salem witch trials.

One of the judges, a prominent Puritan named Samuel Sewall of Boston, became terribly distressed over the role he had played in that debacle. His Christian conscience was finally moved to action when he heard his son recite a familiar Bible passage: "But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy & not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless." The words broke Sewall's heart.

At church services on January 14, 1697, he gave his pastor a statement to read as a contrite Sewall stood ashamed before the congregation. The statement confessed Sewall's guilt for much of what had happened, saying that he "Desires to take the Blame & shame of it, Asking pardon of men, And especially desiring prayers that God, Who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that sin & all other sins." His humble act of sorrow & repentance prompted several other jurors to confess their failures, too.

I shut the magazine & tossed it on the coffee table. That, I thought to myself, is perhaps one of

Christianity's most amazing legacies—the willingness of the mighty to bend the knee of repentance when wrongs have been committed. It was yet another reminder of the power of faith to change lives—& history—for the good.

**OBJECTION:  
I STILL HAVE DOUBTS, SO  
I CAN'T BE A CHRISTIAN**

The lawyer had a tip for me—a human interest story, he said. The tale of a reformed gang member. It will be heartwarming, he promised. A good Sunday read.

I rolled my eyes. I was on the prowl for something hard hitting, something gritty, something that would land me on the front page of the weekend *Tribune*. I wasn't interested in a naïve fairy tale about some flaky born-again fugitive.

But the weekend was approaching fast, & the story leads I had been pursuing had taken me down nothing but blind alleys. So I picked up the telephone & started calling my police sources. Had anyone ever heard of this Ron Bronski character? Sure enough, my contacts in the Gang Crimes Unit were well acquainted with him. He was the street-toughened second-in-command of the Belaires, a gang that terrorized parts of Chicago's NW Side. He was dangerous & violent, they said. He had a hair-trigger temper, an appetite for illicit drugs, & an encyclopedic arrest record.

"We haven't seen him around for a long time," one undercover cop told me. "We figure he's fled the city. The truth is, we don't care where he is as long as he's not around here."

Then I called some church leaders in Portland, Oregon, where the lawyer told me Bronski had been living for the last couple of years. While working at a metal shop, he had met some Christians & supposedly abandoned his life of crime, married his live-in girlfriend, & became a devout follower of Jesus.

"Ron is one of the most beautiful, loving people I know," his pastor told me. "He's totally committed to Christ. We pray together several times a week, & he's always doing things like visiting the sick & praying with them, & using his street knowledge to preach to troubled kids. I guess people would call him a 'Jesus freak.'"

He said that Bronski had been reconciled with God but not with society. "He knew there was still a warrant out for his arrest," he said, "so he saved his money & took the train to Chicago to turn himself in."

That piqued my curiosity. A guilty plea to aggravated battery could bring 20 years in the penitentiary. I decided I would go the next step in my research by interviewing Bronski as soon as his lawyer could arrange a meeting.

That night I was sitting at our kitchen table, mulling the conflicting portraits that the police & pastor had painted of Bronski. "On the surface, it sounds like a miraculous change," I commented to Leslie as she stood at the stove, brewing her evening tea.

"On the surface?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "When I dig deeper, I'll find out his scam."

She eased into the chair across from me & sipped from a mug. "The police weren't hunting for him, but he gave himself up anyway. What would motivate him to do that?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," I said. "He's probably pretending he's reformed so he'll get a lighter sentence. Or his lawyer is trying to cut some sort of deal with the prosecutor. Or he knows the witnesses are all dead & they can't convict him anyway. Or he's hoping to get some positive publicity to influence the judge. Or he's setting up an insanity defense. . ."

I considered every far-out possibility—except that his life had legitimately changed & that he had decided to do the right thing by facing the consequences for his crime.

Finally, Leslie put up her hand. "Whoa, whoa," she said. "Those are pretty bizarre theories." She put down her cup & looked me in the eyes. "Tell me something," she said with an edge to her voice. "Are you trying to poke holes in his story because you really think he's a con man? Or are you raising objections

because you don't want his story to be true?"

"Hey," I shot back, "it's my job to be skeptical!"

But she had struck a nerve. To be honest, I didn't want to believe that Christianity could radically transform someone's character & values. It was much easier to raise doubts & manufacture outrageous objections than to consider the possibility that God actually could trigger a revolutionary turn-around in such a degenerate life.

### **Piercing the Smoke Screen**

As it turned out, Ron Bronski survived my cynical attempts to skewer his story. The street-savvy police detectives were absolutely convinced that the changes in his life were authentic. So was the prosecutor. After hearing the evidence, the judge agreed, & instead of sentencing him to the penitentiary, he set him free on probation. "Go home & be with your family," he told a surprised & grateful Bronski.

Today, more than 20 years later, Bronski is still a minister to street kids in the inner city of Portland, & he remains a close friend of mine.

My initial attitude toward Bronski was reminiscent of the doubts that I had raised as a spiritual skeptic. At first I had objections to the Christian faith. But over time, after I began finding adequate answers to those issues, I started to bring up new & increasingly marginal challenges.

Then one day I remembered Leslie's comment about Ron Bronski, & I imagined how she might confront me again with similar words: "Lee, are you trying to poke holes in Christianity because you really think it's an illusion—or are you raising objections because you don't want it to be true?"

That stung. Admittedly, I had a lot of motivation to find faults with Christianity when I was an atheist. I knew that my hard-drinking, immoral, & self-obsessed lifestyle would have to change if I ever became a follower of Jesus, & I wasn't sure I wanted to let go of that. Consequently, instead of trying to find the truth, I found myself attempting to fend off the truth with fabricated doubts & contrived objections.

I don't think I'm alone in doing this. Many spiritual seekers have legitimate questions concerning Christianity. Yet I think some seekers get to the point where they are subconsciously raising smoke screens to mask their deep-seated motivations for rejecting the faith.

The same is true for Christians who fall prey to doubts about their beliefs. Often, they're having a bout of sincere misgivings about some aspect of their faith; other times, however, they may think they're hung up over an objection to some part of Christianity, when the reality is that they're actually just casting around for some excuse—any excuse—not to take Jesus more seriously.

What can people do if they want to believe in Christ—much like Charles Templeton professed he did in my interview—but they feel that questions about Christianity are blocking their way? Is there a process for resolving doubts when they arise?

I wanted to get answers from someone who has personally known the confusion, the guilt, the maddening ambiguity of uncertainty—& that lured me to Dallas to interview a Christian leader whose faith journey has repeatedly taken him on detours through the valley of the shadow of doubt.

### **INTERVIEW: LYNN ANDERSON, D.MIN.**

Lynn Anderson was born in Saskatchewan 63 years ago. There was no electricity on the homestead where he grew up, just one beloved battery-powered radio that kept the family connected to the outside world.

Anderson has an easy-going charm that belies his deep intellect & impressive accomplishments. He has a master's degree from the Harding Graduate School of Religion & a doctor of ministry degree from Abilene Christian University, where he has been an adjunct professor for more than 2 decades. Anderson was a senior pastor for 30 years at churches in Canada & the U.S., leaving the pulpit in 1996 to found Hope Network Ministries, through which he coaches & mentors church leaders.

He has written a number of books. The book that especially grabbed my attention was his book provocatively titled, *If I Really Believe, Why Do I Have These Doubts?*

## The Roots of Doubt

Anderson was the **son of committed Christians who were part of a small but tight-knit church in an area largely devoid** of Christians. He said he derived his identity & sense of value from his family & church community, but even so his doubts about Christianity started early.

“Even as a little kid, I had a melancholy, contemplative personality,” he began. “I brooded a lot. I was always looking at the underside of things, not taking anything at face value, always questioning. I’ve never been able to totally shake that.”

“When did you become a Christian?” I said.

“I made a profession of faith at a summer camp when I was 11. I was supposed to have committed my life to Jesus, but I wasn’t even sure there was a Jesus. I felt deceptive.”

“Did you mention your feelings to anyone?”

“I talked with a minister, but he didn’t seem to understand,” he said.

“Sometimes I would really sense God’s presence,” he told me. “I would ride home from school in a snowstorm at twilight, singing hymns & feeling I was in God’s hands. But much of the time, I didn’t believe in Him like my church peers did.”

“Were you afraid they might find out?”

“Absolutely, because I **had an enormous need to be loved & accepted in that believing community. I was scared that they’d think I was bad, they’d be angry, they’d think my parents were spiritual failures. I was afraid my parents would be disappointed or ashamed.**

“At college, the doubts moved from the emotional to the intellectual. I ran into questions about the Bible, & I wondered why there’s so much suffering in the world.”

## Species of Doubt

Anderson has described himself as being a “congenital doubter,” or someone who’s always asking, “What if?” **Like lawyers & accountants who are trained to identify what could possibly go wrong, congenital doubters are drawn like magnets to uncertainties & questions. For them, faith doesn’t come naturally.**

But that’s just one species of doubt. I asked Anderson for examples of others.

“Oh, there are lots of different kinds,” he said. “**Some doubters are rebellious, even though they may not identify themselves that way. They have the attitude, ‘I’m not going to let somebody run my life or do my thinking.’ This can take the form of an arrogant pride. Sometimes, a young person wants to rebel against his parents, & one way to do that is to rebel against the God they believe in.**

“Then there are people whose doubts stem from their disappointment with God. Like the girl I visited with yesterday. God says, ‘Seek & ask,’ but she’s asked & He hasn’t given. So she’s wrestling with uncertainty. Was God serious? Was He even there?”

“Others have been **personally hurt in the sense of being rejected by a mate or their business has gone south or their health has gone bad. They’re wondering, ‘If there’s a God, why does this stuff happen?’**

“Then there are the intellectual doubts. This was where I was at. I was doing my best to intellectually undergird my faith, but there were people a lot smarter than me who didn’t believe in God. I started to think, ‘Is faith only for the brilliant? How can faith be so important to God, & yet you’ve got to have an IQ of 197 to hang onto it?’”

## What Faith Isn't

I knew that **misconceptions about faith often open the door to doubts because they can create false expectations or misunderstandings about the nature of God. For instance, if people incorrectly think God has promised to heal everyone or make everyone wealthy if they just exhibit sufficient faith,** they can fall prey to doubts when illness strikes or bankruptcy looms. In order to arrive at an accurate view of faith, I decided to **first clear out the theological underbrush by defining what faith isn't.**

“What are some common misunderstandings about faith?” I asked.



“People mix up faith & feelings,” Anderson replied. “For example, **some people equate faith with a perpetual religious high. When that high wears off, as it inevitably does**, they start to doubt whether they have any faith at all.”

I interrupted. “Are you saying there’s no connection between feelings & faith?”

“No,” he said. “Feelings are connected with some dimensions of faith, but **a lot of that has to do with people’s temperaments. Some folks are just not wired to feel very much, even though they may have strong values & convictions.**”

“How about you?” I asked.

He chuckled. “I tend to be emotionally up & down. It took me years to figure out that this is not a fluctuation of faith. That’s why **we have to be careful about our feelings—they can be fickle**. Let me give you an example.

“A guy once told me, ‘I don’t like my wife anymore.’ My response was to tell him, ‘Go home & love her.’ But he said, ‘You don’t understand—I have no feelings for her anymore.’ I said, ‘I wasn’t asking how you felt. I was saying, ‘Go home & love her.’ Then he said, ‘But it would be emotionally dishonest for me to treat my wife that way when I don’t feel it.’

“So I asked, ‘Does your mother love you?’ That seemed to insult him. He said, ‘Yeah, of course.’ I said, ‘About 3 weeks after she had brought you home from the hospital & you were screaming with dirty diapers & she had to wake up dog tired & put her bare feet on the cold floor, change your diapers, & feed you a bottle—did you think she really got a bang out of that?’ He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘Well, then, I think your mother was being emotionally dishonest.’

“Here was the point I was making: the measure of her love wasn’t that she felt good about changing the diapers, but that she was **willing to do it even when she wasn’t feeling particularly happy about it**. And I think we need to learn that about faith. **Faith is not always about having positive emotional feelings toward God or life.**”

“Okay, that’s one misconception,” I said. “What about the idea that faith is the absence of doubt?”

“**Yes, some people think that faith means a lack of doubt, but that’s not true,**” he said. “One of my favorite Bible texts is about the man who comes to Jesus with his demon-possessed son, hoping that the boy would get healed. Jesus says all things are possible to those who believe. And the man’s response is so powerful. He says, ‘I believe, but would You help me with my unbelief?’”

“So **doubt & faith can co-exist?**” I asked.

“Yeah, it means you can have doubts even when you believe. That was **even true of Abraham**. He clearly believed, but at the same time, he had doubts. You can see that by what he did at times & what he said. Now, **I don’t know where you cross the line** into corrosive, eroding, negative doubt, but I do believe that **where there’s absolutely no doubt, there’s probably no healthy faith.**”

Anderson’s **eyes bored into me as if to emphasize his next words**. “You see,” he stressed, “**a faith that’s challenged by adversity or tough questions or contemplation is often a stronger faith in the end.**”

## **Delving Beneath the Surface**

“In your experience,” I said to Anderson, “do some people claim to have intellectual objections, even though their doubts have another underlying source?”

“Yes, that’s certainly true,” he said. “In fact, I personally think all unbelief ultimately has some other underlying reason. Sometimes a person may honestly believe their problem is intellectual, but actually they haven’t sufficiently gotten in touch with themselves to explore other possibilities.”

“Can you give me an example?” I asked.

“When I was a youngster, a brilliant novelist—an atheist from an atheistic, communist family—came to our little town in Canada to gather local color for a book he was writing. One day he was visiting with our family & he got real serious. He said, ‘Can I ask you questions about your religion?’ Even though I had been wrestling with doubts from time to time, I said yes.

“He asked, ‘Do you really believe there’s a God Who knows my name?’ I said, ‘Yeah, that’s what I

believe.’ He said, ‘Do you believe the Bible’s true? Babies born from virgins, dead people coming out of the cemetery?’ I said, ‘Yes, that’s what I believe.’

“Then he said with great emotion, ‘I’d give anything to believe that, because I’ve traveled all over the world & I’ve seen that most people are miserable. The only people who really seem to be getting out of life what they want are the people who say they believe what you believe. But I just can’t believe because my head keeps getting in the way!’”

Anderson’s eyes got wide. “I was blown away, Lee. I didn’t know what to say next because his head was a lot smarter than mine!”

Then Anderson leaned closer to me. “But, in retrospect, I don’t think his head was the real problem,” he said. “I started thinking about what he would lose if he followed Jesus. He was part of a guild of brilliant writers who all think religion is a total crock. I really believe his professional pride & the rejection of his peers would have been too high a price for him to pay.”

He let the story soak in. “Let me give you another example,” he offered.

“Once I was talking with an ex-Marine who said, ‘I’m miserable. I’ve got a wife & kids, & I’m making more money than I can spend with both hands, & I’m sleeping with every woman in town—and I hate myself. You’ve got to help me, but don’t give me any of that God talk because I can’t believe that stuff.’

“We talked for hours. Finally, I said, ‘Maybe you think you’re shooting straight with me, but I’m not sure you are. I don’t think your problem is that you can’t believe; I think it’s that you won’t believe because you’re afraid to give up the things that help get you through the night.’

“He thought for a while & then said, ‘Yeah, I guess that’s true. I can’t imagine sleeping with just one woman. I can’t imagine going with less money than I make, which I’d have to do because I lie to get it.’ He was finally trying to be honest.”

With that, Anderson’s voice dropped to an intense whisper. “And here’s my point,” he said. “That man would argue & argue for hours about his cerebral doubts. He would convince people that he couldn’t believe because he had too many intellectual objections. But they were just a smokescreen. They were merely a fog he used to obscure his real hesitations about God.

“Then there was the time I had a conversation about God with a guy in the Pacific NW. He was raising all kinds of intellectual issues. But when we got beneath that, it turned out he didn’t want to believe in God because he didn’t want to sell his topless bar. The money was too good & he was having too much fun making it.

“Here’s my experience,” Anderson said in summary. “When you scratch below the surface, there’s either a will to believe or there’s a will *not* to believe. *That’s* the core of it.”

I stroked my chin in thought. “So you’re saying faith is a choice.” I said.

Anderson nodded in agreement. “That’s exactly right,” he replied. “It’s a choice.”

## The Decision to Believe

When I asked Anderson to elaborate on the roles of faith & the will, he immediately brought up the Old Testament character Abraham as an illustration.

“He was called the ‘father of the faith,’” said Anderson, “but it wasn’t that he never doubted, it wasn’t that he always did the right thing, it wasn’t that his motives were always pure. He failed on all 3 counts. But listen—Abraham never gave up on his will to follow God. He said, ‘I’m going to trust Him—will not the King of all the earth do right?’ He wouldn’t give up on God. And one definition of faith is that it’s the will to believe. It’s the decision to follow the best light you have about God & not quit.

“The idea of choice runs all the way through Scripture. Look at Joshua. He says to choose this day whom you’re going to serve, but as for him & his house, they will serve the Lord. So faith, at its taproot, is a decision of the will.”

I lifted my hand to stop him. “But isn’t there also a sense in which faith is a gift from God?” I asked.

“Yes,” he conceded, “and that raises a mystery about choice & free will. But I look at it like the power steering on a car. Good luck trying to move the car’s tires without it. But with one finger you can

supply the impulse of request & the power steering will empower you to turn the wheels. In a similar way, our wills make the decision to put our trust in Christ, & God empowers us.

“Listen to Jn.7:17,” he said. “Jesus says, **‘If a man chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God** or whether I speak on My Own.’ So, somehow, if we have the will to believe, God then confirms that Jesus is from God.”

He turned a few pages to Jn.12:37. “The Bible elaborates on this when it says, **‘Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still *would not* believe in Him.’** Then 2 verses later, it says, **‘For this reason they *could not* believe.’**

“In other words, they made a decision of the will to deny the message of the miracles—the evidence that Jesus is God—because **they wouldn’t pay the price, which would be their whole religious system being blown out of the water,**” he explained. “And **they had made this decision not to believe for so long that they had dismantled their capacity to believe.** Consequently, at its core, faith is a decision of the will that we keep on making, but we’re given that option by God’s grace. We’re empowered to keep making it by His Spirit.”

“And,” I observed, “it’s a choice we must make without having all the complete information we’d like to have.”

“That’s right. Otherwise, what we would have is knowledge, not faith.

“Sometimes people think that faith is knowing something is true beyond any doubt whatsoever, & so they try to prove faith through empirical evidence,” he said. “But that’s the wrong approach.”

He gestured toward a coin on the table. “You can see & touch that quarter, so you don’t need faith. God, for His Own reasons, has not subjected Himself to that kind of proof.

“Instead, people should do what you did in *The Case for Christ*—you relied on corroborative evidence. You **showed how various strands of evidence point convincingly toward God.** And that does something very important—it leaves room for us to make a choice by taking a step of faith in the same direction that the evidence is pointing.”

## Dealing with Doubt

“When you teach on this topic, you tell people that **initially they need to decide whether or not they really want to believe,**” I said. “Why do you start there?”

“Because some people say they want to believe when they really don’t. As I said earlier, they raise intellectual issues when they’re just trying to deflect attention away from why they really don’t want to believe. For instance, a college girl told me, **‘It looks to me like this whole Christian crock is invented by people who have a psychological need to believe.’**

“My answer was, **yes, people have a psychological need to believe—just as some people have psychological needs *not* to believe.** I said to her, **‘What’s the reason *you* don’t want to believe? Is it because you don’t want the responsibility faith brings with it? Is it because of despair over your own incorrigibility? Or is it because you don’t want to give up parties?’**

“She was **startled.** She said, **‘Who told you that? It’s a little bit of all 3.’** Okay, she’s got emotional reasons for not wanting to believe. Other people have different reasons.

“But people really have to decide **why they want to believe.** Is it because they’ve seen some evidence **Christianity is true? Or because they’re desperate without God? And if they don’t want to believe, why not?**

“If they have intellectual doubts, that’s fine, but don’t stop there. They need to go deeper into what really may be driving them to back away from God.”

“Assuming a person wants to believe,” I said, “what do you recommend as a next step?”

“I suggest they **go where faith is.** **If you want to grow roses, you don’t buy an acre at the North Pole.** You go where roses grow well. If you’re going to do faith, you probably don’t want to join American Atheists, Inc. **Get around people who you respect for their life, their mind, their character, & their faith, & learn from them. Watch their life.**

“And I encourage people to **put faith-building materials into their mind.** By that, I mean books, tapes, & music that build strong motivation for faith, that give hope that you can connect with God, that give

you tools to develop your spirituality.”

These suggestions made sense. But something was missing. “Faith for the sake of faith is meaningless,” I said. “Isn’t it important to establish exactly where you’re putting your faith?”

“Precisely, which is why the next step is to clarify the object of your faith,” Anderson replied. “We Canadians know there are 2 kinds of ice: thick & thin. You can have very little faith in thick ice & it will hold you up just fine; you can have enormous faith in thin ice & you can drown. It’s not the amount of faith you can muster that matters up front. It may be tiny, like a mustard seed. But your faith must be invested in something solid.

“So people need to clarify their reasons for believing. Why should they believe in Jesus rather than the Maharishi? Where’s the substance?” Anderson gestured toward the Bible on the table. “Obviously, I’m prejudiced,” he said, “but **when it comes right down to it, the only object of faith that is solidly supported by the evidence of history & archaeology & literature & experience is Jesus.**”

## The Faith Experiment

“At some point, the faith journey needs to begin,” I said. “How does that happen?”

“Sitting & brooding over faith & doubt will never make a believer out of anybody,” came Anderson’s response. “Neither will reading all the right books or hanging out with the right people or even making the decision to believe. Ultimately, you must embark on your experiment of faith by doing what faith would do.

“Jesus said that if we continue in His Word—that is, continue doing what Jesus says—then we are truly His disciples. Being a disciple means you’re a ‘following learner.’ And when you’re a following learner, you will know the truth & the truth will set you free.

“Knowing the truth doesn’t mean filling your head with knowledge; this is the **Hebrew ‘know,’ which isn’t gathering information. It’s experiential knowledge. Like Adam knew Eve—he didn’t just know her name & address; he experienced her.**

“To experience the truth & be set free, you have to be a following learner. In other words, do what Jesus says & you’ll experience the validity of it. It’s kind of like riding a bicycle. You can’t watch a video or read a book about it; you’ve got to get on one & get the feel of it.”

“How does a person do that?” I asked.

“You say, ‘I’ve heard some things that Jesus taught. They sound like good ideas to me, but I don’t know if they’re true. For instance, I’ve heard Jesus say it’s more blessed to give than to receive. How can I know if that’s true?’ Well, 1,000 debates won’t prove it. But when you become generous, you’ll realize this is truth. You might say, ‘Oh, maybe Jesus accidentally guessed right about that one.’ Then just keep going. You’ll be amazed at how often He ‘guessed’ right!”

I reached over to pick up Anderson’s Bible, rummaging through it until I came to Ps.34:8. “King David said, ‘Taste & see that the Lord is good,’” I said. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

“That’s the idea. The more you do this,” he said with conviction, “the more you will experientially be woven into a web of faith.”

“I know, Lee, that you’re a former atheist,” Anderson said. “You could probably come up with 100 questions about God that I wouldn’t know how to answer. But do you know what? It doesn’t matter, because I’ve discovered that this is true.

“I didn’t develop a silly grin & glassy eyes. I’ve discovered it is more blessed to give than it is to receive. Every time I discover a new insight, every time Jesus speaks to me personally in ways I can’t even articulate, every time I practice His teachings & experience the results—well, after a while I don’t care how many intellectual questions you have about why this can’t be true. I *know* it’s true.

“It’s like you say, ‘Prove to me that a rainbow is beautiful.’ I say, ‘Well, it’s red & green.’ But you say, ‘I don’t like green & red together.’ I’d say, ‘But the way they are in the rainbow, it’s beautiful!’ I’ve never heard of anyone who thought a rainbow was ugly. When you are able to actually look at it for yourself, then I don’t need to say any more. You’ve seen it, you’ve experienced it, & you know it’s beautiful.

“I think faith is like that. Eventually, you have to move out & do it. **By the way, in the Gospel of**

**John, faith is never a noun, it's always a verb. Faith is action; it's never just mental assent. It's a direction of life.** So when we begin to do faith, God begins to validate it. And the further we follow the journey, the more we know it's true."

"If faith is experiential, then you could get into Buddhism & find that meditation lowers your blood pressure & makes you feel good," I pointed out. "But that doesn't necessarily mean Buddhism is true."

"But remember that **experience is just one avenue of evidence,**" he cautioned. "You also have to clarify the object of your faith, to determine if there are valid reasons for believing it's true. But **the ultimate test of the pudding is in the eating. Buddhism does work for some things; atheism works for some things.** But if you pursue the whole Jesus journey, you find that His teachings work consistently because they're true. **Christianity isn't true because it works; it works because it's true.**"

"Do you ever have moments when you still doubt?" I asked.

"Oh, man, yeah!" he exclaimed. "I struggle with why I don't make more progress in overcoming my pet sins. Surely this can't be God's fault—but on the other hand, why is He making it so hard for me? I have those kind of doubts. **I struggle with the horrible things happening in the world. Why doesn't a loving God deal with this?** I'm not saying I don't believe in Him. I'm saying I don't have the complete & final answer to that question."

"Is there hope for congenital doubters like yourself?"

Anderson was adamant. "Yes, yes," he insisted. "Absolutely. When I say I struggle with my doubts & sins, I don't want to sound like someone who is being defeated or who has no hope. One guy from my church read my book on doubt & said, 'Oh, no! You mean you don't really believe?' I told him, 'No, I really *do* believe, but would you help me with my unbelief?'"

"These days, I'm experiencing God more than ever. **I can even see God's grace in those times when He feels absent** from me, **just like the attributes of my wife seem more real when I'm away** from her because I long for her. I pray more these days, & I see more of God's response to prayer than I ever have in my life. **I feel less need to control other people or outcomes because I know God is in control.**

"And ironically, I feel less equipped to answer all the objections that come from brilliant skeptics. But do you know what? That doesn't matter to me like it used to. Because I know this is true. I see it.

"**I see it in my life, I see it in my marriage, I see it in my children, I see it in my relationships, I see it in other people's lives when they're changed by the power of God,** when they're renewed by Him, when they're freed by His truth."

Anderson's voice had an undercurrent of confident authority. Then, with a ring of finality, he declared: "Lee, I'm telling you—I've tasted! And I have seen that the Lord is good."

## CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF FAITH

As I delved into the most troublesome obstacles to faith, they tended to loom so large in my mind that they crowded out other relevant information. And maybe as you've focused on an issue that's particularly nettlesome for you, the same phenomenon has occurred.

Debunking Christianity takes more than just trying to poke a hole in it by raising an objection. That's because there's a backdrop of other relevant evidence that creates a strong presumption in favor of faith in Jesus Christ. **Simply examining individual challenges isn't enough; this broad sweep of evidence needs to be kept in mind** as each individual objection is weighed.

What kind of evidence? My interviews with the experts elicited these persuasive facts that point powerfully toward the existence of God & His unique Son, Jesus Christ:

- **The Big Bang.** William Lane Craig, co-author of *Theism, Atheism, & Big Bang Cosmology*, showed that the universe & time itself had a beginning at some point in the finite past. Scientists refer to this as the Big Bang. Craig argued that whatever begins to exist has a cause, the universe began to exist, & therefore the universe has a cause—that is, a Creator Who is uncaused, changeless, timeless, & immaterial. Even renowned atheist Kai Nielsen once said: "Suppose you suddenly hear a loud bang ... & you ask me, 'What

made that bang?’ & I reply, ‘Nothing, it just happened.’ You would not accept that.” To which Craig said that if there is obviously a cause for a little bang, doesn’t it also make sense that there would be a Cause for a Big Bang?

- **The fine-tuned universe.** In the past 35 years, [scientists have been stunned to discover how life in the universe is astoundingly balanced on a razor’s edge](#). The Big Bang was actually a highly ordered event that required an enormous amount of information, & [from the moment of inception the universe was finely tuned to an incomprehensible precision for the existence of life](#) like ourselves. An infinitesimal difference in the rate of the universe’s initial expansion, the strength of gravity or dozens of other constants & quantities would have created a life-prohibiting rather than a life-sustaining universe. All of this contributes to the conclusion that there’s an Intelligent Designer behind Creation.

- **The moral law.** [Without God, morality is basically a question of taste or personal preference](#). In other words, [without God there is no absolute right & wrong](#) that imposes itself on our conscience. [But we know deep down that objective moral values do exist](#)—some actions like rape, for example, are universal moral abominations—&, therefore, this means God exists.

- **The origin of life.** [Darwinism can offer no credible theory for how life could have emerged naturally from nonliving chemicals](#). Earth’s early atmosphere would have blocked the development of the building blocks of life, & [assembling even the most primitive living matter would be so outrageously difficult that it absolutely could not have been the product of unguided or random processes](#). On the contrary, the vast amount of specific information contained inside every living cell—encoded in the 4-letter chemical alphabet of DNA—strongly confirms the existence of an Intelligent Designer Who was behind the miraculous Creation of life.

- **The Bible’s credibility.** Scholar Norman Geisler convincingly argued that there’s more evidence that the Bible is a reliable source than there is for any other book from the ancient world. Its [trustworthiness has been corroborated repeatedly by archaeological discoveries](#), “and if we can trust the Bible when it’s telling us about straightforward earthly things that can be verified, then we can trust it in areas where we can’t directly verify it in an empirical way,” he said. Further, the Bible’s divine origin has been established in 2 ways. First, in defiance of all mathematical odds, dozens of ancient prophecies about the Messiah—including the precise time frame in which He would appear—were miraculously fulfilled in only one person throughout history: Jesus of Nazareth. Second, biblical prophets performed miracles to confirm their divine authority. [Jesus’ Own miracles were even acknowledged by His enemies. By contrast, in the Koran when unbelievers challenged Muhammad to perform a miracle, he refused & merely told them to read a chapter in the Koran](#), even though he conceded, “God hath certainly power to send down a sign.”

- **The resurrection of Jesus.** Craig built a compelling case that Jesus Christ returned from the dead in the ultimate authentication of His claim to divinity. He presented 4 facts that are widely accepted by New Testament historians from a broad spectrum. First, after being crucified, Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. This means its location was known to Jew, Christian, & Roman alike. Second, on the Sunday after the crucifixion the tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers. Indeed, nobody claimed the tomb was anything but vacant. Third, on multiple occasions & under various circumstances, different individuals & groups experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead. This cannot be dismissed as legendary because of the extremely early date of these accounts. Fourth, the original [disciples suddenly & sincerely came to believe Jesus was risen from the dead despite their predisposition to the contrary. They were willing to go to their death proclaiming Jesus was resurrected & thus proved He was the Son of God](#)—& [nobody knowingly & willingly dies for a lie](#).

In addition, the 13 scholars & experts I interviewed for my previous book, [The Case for Christ](#), established that the biographies of Jesus in the New Testament stand up to intellectual scrutiny; that they were reliably passed down to us through history; that there’s corroborating evidence for Jesus outside the Bible; that Jesus wasn’t psychologically imbalanced when He claimed He was God; & that He fulfilled all the attributes of deity. [Please see the summary of [The Case for Christ](#) that follows for an overview of these findings.]

## Accounting for the Evidence

Every single objection needs to be weighed in light of this overwhelming positive evidence for the existence of God & the deity of Jesus Christ. This mountain of evidence can give us confidence that even though we may not fully understand why there's suffering or why Hell exists, we can trust that God is just, that He is acting appropriately, & that someday we'll have a deeper explanation.

After spending a year investigating objections, I remained utterly convinced that the most rational & logical step people can take is to invest their faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

## Making a Choice

At the University of Southern California, we spoke with philosopher Dallas Willard, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of our day.

At one point, as we discussed how people respond to God, Willard made an especially interesting observation: "The issue is, what do we want? The Bible says that if you seek God with all your heart, then you will surely find Him. *Surely find Him*. It's the person who wants to know God that God reveals Himself to. And if a person doesn't want to know God—well, God has created the world & the human mind in such a way that He doesn't have to."

He reached over & dug through a stack of papers on his desk, withdrawing a single sheet. "This is a handout I gave to the students in my class," he said. I took the paper & read the words:

Next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world will be knocked to our knees by a percussive & ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls, leaves drop from trees, the earth heaves & buckles, buildings topple & towers tumble. The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, & just then, as all the people of this world look up, the heavens open, & the clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant & immense like figure towering over us like 100 Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays over the features of His Michelangeloid face, & then He points down, at me, & explains for every man, woman, & child to hear, "I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping & word-watching in matters of theology. *Be assured, Norwood Russell Hanson, that I most certainly do exist!*"

"So," said Willard, "I asked the class, 'If this really happened, how would Hanson respond?'"

I said, "You think he'd explain it away."

"Absolutely!" Willard replied. "It's very unfortunate, but I think he'd explain it away. We need to be alert to the fact that, in nearly every case imaginable, answered prayer can be explained away if you want to. And that's what people normally do. They say, 'Well, I'm very smart; I can't be fooled by all these things.'"

I could relate to that. I told Willard about the time when my newborn daughter was rushed into intensive care because of a mysterious illness that was threatening her life. The doctors weren't able to diagnose it. Even though I was an atheist, I was so desperate that I actually prayed & implored God—if He existed—to heal her. A short time later, she astounded everyone by suddenly getting completely better. The doctors were left scratching their heads.

"My response," I told Willard, "was to explain it away. I said, 'What a coincidence! She must have had some bacteria or virus that spontaneously disappeared.' I wouldn't even consider the possibility that God had acted. Instead, I stayed in my atheism."

Willard smiled at the story. "I don't mean to diagnose your case in your presence," he said gently, "but might it be that your pride got in the way? You were too smart! You weren't going to be taken in by this. Let all the little old ladies be fooled, but not you. As long as a person has that attitude, that's their response."

Bingo! He was right on target. Even if there had been a proliferation of corroborating evidence that God had intervened, I would have come up with any explanation no matter how bizarre, no matter how nonsensical—other than the possibility that He had answered my prayer. I was too proud to bend the knee to anyone, & too enmeshed in my lifestyle to want to give it up.

“I guarantee you,” continued Willard, “that it wouldn’t take 5 minutes to explain away a clear-cut miracle like the fire that came down out of the heavens to consume the altar in the case of Elijah in the Old Testament. And do you know what? People did explain it away! If they hadn’t, the history of Israel would have been very different from what it was.

“And God has set up prayer in such a way that, if you want to explain it away, you can. That’s the human mind. God set it up like that for a reason, which is this: *God ordained that people should be governed in the end by what they want.*”

## A Will to Believe

That insight from Willard cut to the heart of my spiritual journey. If I wanted to, I could continue to try to explain away the words of the experts I had interviewed, no matter how outlandish or nitpicking my arguments would eventually become. And [my mind is quite capable of manufacturing all kinds of elaborate rebuttals, excuses, & counter-arguments—even in the face of obvious truth.](#)

Ultimately, though, [faith isn’t about having perfect & complete answers to every single objection. After all, we don’t demand that level of conclusive proof in any other area of life.](#) The point is that we certainly do have sufficient evidence about God upon which to act. And in the end, that’s the issue. Faith is about a choice, a step of the will, a decision to want to know God personally. It’s saying, “I believe—please help my unbelief!” As Willard said, “It’s the person who wants to know God that God reveals Himself to.” Or as Lynn Anderson had told me: “When you scratch below the surface, there’s either a will to believe or there’s a will not to believe. That’s the core of it.”

[I was thankful that I didn’t have to throw out my intellect to become a Christian. But I \*did\* have to overcome my pride. I \*did\* have to drive a stake through the egoism & arrogance that threatened to hold me back. I \*did\* have to conquer the self-interest & self-adulation that were keeping my heart shut tight from God.](#)

To apply Willard’s words to myself, the biggest issue was: “What did I want?” Did I *want* to know God personally—to [experience release from guilt, to live the way I was designed to live, to pursue His purposes for my life, to tap into His power for daily living, to commune with Him](#) in this life & for eternity in the next? If so, there was plenty of evidence upon which to base a rational decision to say “yes” to Him.

It was up to me—just as it’s up to you. As William Craig expressed it:

**If God does not exist, then life is futile.** If the God of the Bible does exist, then life is meaningful. Only the second of these 2 alternatives enables us to live happily & consistently. Therefore, it seems to me that even if the evidence for these 2 options were absolutely equal, a rational person ought to choose biblical Christianity. It seems to me positively irrational to prefer death, futility, & destruction to life, meaningfulness, & happiness. **As [Blaise] Pascal said, we have nothing to lose & infinity to gain.**

## Changing a Life

This episode occurred after my Atlanta interview with Craig about the issue of miracles. I got into my rental car & took a [leisurely drive up Interstate 75 to Rome, Georgia.](#) The next morning was cool but sunny, & I got dressed & headed over to a church for Sunday services.

Outside, politely greeting everyone with a handshake as they arrived, was William Neal Moore. His face was deep mahogany, his black hair was close-cropped, but what I remember most was his smile: it was at once shy & warm, gentle & sincere, winsome & loving. It made me feel welcome.

Moore is an ordained minister at the church, which is sandwiched between 2 housing projects in the racially mixed community. He is a [doting father, a devoted husband, a faithful provider, a hard-working employee, a man of compassion & prayer who spends his spare time helping hurting people. In short, a model citizen.](#)

But turn back the calendar to May84. At that time, Moore was [locked in the death-watch cell at the Georgia State Penitentiary, down the hallway from the electric chair where his life was scheduled to be snuffed out in less than 72 hours.](#)



This was not the case of an innocent man being railroaded by the justice system. Unquestionably, Moore was a murderer. He had admitted as much. After a childhood of poverty & occasional petty crimes, he had joined the Army & later became depressed by marital & financial woes. One night he got drunk & broke into the house of 77-year-old Fredger Stapleton, who was known to keep large amounts of cash in his bedroom.

From behind a door, Stapleton let loose with a shotgun blast, & Moore fired back with a pistol. Stapleton was killed instantly, & within minutes Moore was fleeing with \$5,600. An informant tipped police & the next morning he was arrested at his trailer outside of town. Caught with the proceeds from the crime, Moore admitted his guilt & was sentenced to death. He had squandered his life & turned to violence, & now he himself would face a violent end.

But the Moore who was counting down the hours to his scheduled execution was not the same person who had murdered Fredger Stapleton. Shortly after being imprisoned, 2 church leaders visited Moore at the behest of his mother. They told him about the mercy & hope that was available through Jesus Christ.

“Nobody had ever told me that Jesus loves me & died for me,” Moore explained during my visit to Georgia. “It was a love I could feel. It was a love I wanted. It was a love I needed.”

On that day, Moore said yes to Christ’s free gift of forgiveness & eternal life, & he was promptly baptized in a small tub that was used by prison trusties. And he would never be the same.

For 16 years on Death Row, Moore was like a Missionary among the other inmates. He led Bible studies & conducted prayer sessions. He counseled prisoners & introduced many of them to faith in Jesus Christ. Some churches actually sent people to Death Row to be counseled by him. He took dozens of Bible courses by correspondence. He won the forgiveness of his victim’s family. He became known as “The Peacemaker,” because his cellblock, largely populated by inmates who had become Christians through his influence, was always the safest, the quietest, the most orderly.

Meanwhile, Moore inched closer & closer to execution. Legally speaking, his case was a hopeless cause. Since he had pleaded guilty, there were virtually no legal issues that might win his release on appeal. Time after time, the courts reaffirmed his death sentence.

So profound was the depth of Moore’s transformation, however, that people began to take notice. Mother Teresa & others started campaigning to save his life. “Billy’s not what he was then,” said a former inmate who had met Moore in prison. “If you kill him today, you’re killing a body, but a body with a different mind. It would be like executing the wrong man.”

Praising him for not only being rehabilitated but also being “an agent of the rehabilitation of others,” an editorial in the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* declared: “In the eyes of many, he is a saintly figure.”

Just hours prior to Moore’s being strapped into the electric chair, shortly before Moore’s head & right calf would be shaved so that the lethal electrodes could be attached, the courts surprised nearly everyone by issuing a temporary halt to his execution.

Even more amazingly, the Georgia Board of Pardons & Parole later voted unanimously to spare his life by commuting his sentence to life in prison. But what was really astounding—in fact, unprecedented in modern Georgia history—was when the Parole & Pardon Board decided that Moore, an admitted & once-condemned armed robber & murderer, should go free. On 8Nov91, he was released.

As I sat with Moore in his home overlooking a landscape of lush pine trees, I asked him about the source of his amazing metamorphosis.

“It was the prison rehabilitation system that did it, right?” I asked.

Moore laughed. “No, it wasn’t that,” he replied.

“Then it was a self-help program or having a positive mental attitude,” I suggested.

He shook his head emphatically. “No, not that, either.”

“Prozac? Transcendental Meditation? Psychological counseling?”

“Come on, Lee,” he said. “You know it wasn’t any of those.”

He was right. I knew the real reason. I just wanted to hear him say it. “Then what was responsible for the transformation of Billy Moore?” I asked.

“Plain & simple, it was Jesus Christ,” he declared adamantly. “He changed me in ways I could never have changed on my own. He gave me a reason to live. He helped me do the right thing. He gave me a heart for others. He saved my soul.”

That’s the power of faith to change a human life. “Therefore,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Billy Moore the Christian is not the same as Billy Moore the killer. God had intervened with His forgiveness, with His mercy, with His power, [with the abiding presence of His Spirit. That same kind of transforming grace is available to everyone](#) who acts on the ample evidence for Jesus Christ by making the [decision to turn away from their sin & embrace Him as their forgiver & leader.](#)

It’s awaiting all those who say yes to God & His ways.

## Reaffirming the Faith

It was in 1981 when I originally responded to the evidence by deciding to abandon atheism & cling to Christ. And like Moore, I’ve never been the same. [Opening my life wider & wider to God & His ways, I’ve found my values, my character, my priorities, my attitudes, my relationships, my desires have been changing over time—for the better.](#)

Today, having now retraced my original investigation, my confidence in that [1981 decision](#) has only been reinforced. Asking uncomfortable questions hasn’t diminished my faith; it has strengthened it. Probing the “soft spots” of Christianity has reaffirmed for me once more the fundamental soundness & logical integrity of the faith. [Refined by the rigors of intellectual scrutiny, my faith has emerged deeper, richer, more resilient, & more certain than ever.](#)

How, I wondered, would Charles Templeton have reacted to my interviews with these experts? Would he have been receptive to their evidence & arguments? Or [would the inexorable advance of Alzheimer’s have already robbed him of the capacity to rethink spiritual issues anew?](#)

## A Note of Hope

It was mid-afternoon on a bright spring day in Orange County, California, where Leslie & I had recently moved. I had just [printed out the nearly 500 pages of the manuscript of this book](#) & was in the midst of packing them into a box when Leslie poked her head into my office.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I gestured toward the manuscript. “There’s someone I want to send this to,” I replied.

Leslie put down her cup of tea & walked over to put her arm around my shoulder. “Chuck Templeton, right?” she said. “I think about him from time to time. In fact, I’ve been praying for him.”

That didn’t surprise me. “Praying what?” I asked.

“That he’d still be healthy enough to reconsider his conclusions about God. That he’d be open to the explanations you’ve received from the experts. That he’d respond to that tug inside of him that seems to be pulling him toward Jesus.”

I nodded. I had been praying too. “I talked to his wife on the phone a few minutes ago,” I said. “She told me the Alzheimer’s hasn’t been very kind to Chuck & that now he has some other health problems. When I got a chance to talk to Chuck & ask him how his Alzheimer’s was, he answered with just one word in a very despondent voice—he said, ‘Devastating.’”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Leslie said quietly.

“Me too,” I sighed. “It’s very sad.” I put some more pages into the box. “She also said [Billy Graham came to see Chuck a few months ago.](#)”

Leslie’s eyes widened. “Really?” she said. “What happened?”

“They hadn’t seen each other in quite a while. She said when Chuck recognized him, it was as if a chill went through him & [he started crying & threw his arms around Billy & hugged him.](#) She couldn’t say enough wonderful things about how kind & loving Billy was. They visited for a while & ate together. Billy prayed before the meal—she said, ‘That’s the first time grace has ever been said at our table.’ Then before he

left, Billy prayed for Chuck.”

“Madeleine said she was anxious to see my book & promised to read it to Chuck,” I said. “I just hope he hasn’t waited too long & that his mind will be clear enough to understand what these scholars have said. But I feel like I’ve got to send it—just in case.”

With that, I sat down to [write him a letter, wishing him well & encouraging him](#), as best he can, to keep an open mind & take a fresh look at the evidence for Jesus. I signed my name, & added this postscript:

Chuck, I hope you’ll take to heart what [Pr.2:3-5](#) says: “If you scream for insight & call loudly for understanding, if you pursue it like you would money, & search it out as you would hidden treasure, then the Lord will be awesome to you, & you will come into possession of the knowledge of God.”

I sealed the note in an envelope & tossed it into the box, then picked up the car keys.

“Let’s go mail this,” I said.

### **A SUMMARY OF THE CASE FOR CHRIST**

In *The Case for Christ*, I retraced & expanded upon my 1980-81 journey from atheism to Christianity by interviewing 13 leading experts on the historical evidence for Jesus Christ. Below is a summary of the answers to the issues I investigated.

#### **• CAN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF JESUS BE TRUSTED?**

I once thought the gospels were merely religious propaganda, hopelessly tainted by overactive imaginations & evangelistic zeal. But [Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary](#), one of the country’s foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, built a convincing case that they reflect [eyewitness testimony & bear the unmistakable earmarks of accuracy](#). So early are these accounts of Jesus’ life that they cannot be explained away as legendary invention. “Within the first 2 years after His death,” Blomberg said, “significant numbers of Jesus’ followers seem to have formulated a doctrine of the atonement, were convinced that He had been raised from the dead in bodily form, associated Jesus with God, & believed they found support for all these convictions in the Old Testament.” A study indicates that there was nowhere near enough time for legend to have developed & wiped out a solid core of historical truth.

#### **• DO JESUS’ BIOGRAPHIES STAND UP TO SCRUTINY?**

Blomberg argued persuasively that the gospel writers intended to preserve reliable history, were able to do so, were [honest & willing to include difficult-to-explain material, & didn’t allow bias to unduly color their reporting](#). The [harmony among the gospels on essential facts, coupled with divergence on some incidental details, lends historical credibility to the accounts](#). What’s more, the [Early Church could not have taken root & flourished right there in Jerusalem if it had been teaching facts about Jesus that His Own contemporaries could have exposed as exaggerated or false](#). In short, the gospels were able to pass all 8 evidential tests, demonstrating their basic trustworthiness as historical records.

#### **• WERE JESUS’ BIOGRAPHIES RELIABLY PRESERVED FOR US?**

[World-class scholar Bruce Metzger, professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary](#), said that compared with other ancient documents, there are an unprecedented number of New Testament manuscripts & that they can be dated extremely close to the original writings. The [modern New Testament is 99.5% free of textual discrepancies](#), with no major Christian doctrines in doubt. The criteria used by the Early Church to determine which books should be considered authoritative have ensured that we possess the best records about Jesus.

#### **• IS THERE CREDIBLE EVIDENCE FOR JESUS OUTSIDE HIS BIOGRAPHIES?**

“We have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion,” said [Edwin Yamauchi of Miami University, a leading expert on ancient history](#). Sources from outside the Bible corroborate that many people believed Jesus performed healings & was the Messiah, that He was crucified, & that despite this shameful death, His followers, who believed He was still alive, worshiped Him as God. One expert [documented 39 ancient sources that corroborate more than 100 facts concerning Jesus’ life](#), teachings, crucifixion, & resurrection. Seven secular sources & several early Christian creeds concern the deity of Jesus, a doctrine “definitely present in the earliest Church,” according to Dr. Gary Habermas, the scholar who wrote *The Historical Jesus*.

#### • DOES ARCHAEOLOGY CONFIRM OR CONTRADICT JESUS’ BIOGRAPHIES?

John McRay, a [professor of archaeology for more than 15 years & author of \*Archaeology & the New Testament\*](#), said there’s no question that archaeological findings have enhanced the New Testament’s credibility. [No discovery has ever disproved a biblical reference](#). Further, archaeology has established that [Luke, who wrote about ¼ of the New Testament, was an especially careful historian](#). Concluded one expert: “If Luke was so painstakingly accurate in his historical reporting [of minor details], on what logical basis may we assume he was credulous or inaccurate in his reporting of matters that were far more important, not only to him but to others as well?” Like, for instance, the resurrection of Jesus—the event that authenticated His claim to being the unique Son of God.

#### • IS THE JESUS OF HISTORY THE SAME AS THE JESUS OF FAITH?

Gregory Boyd, a [Yale- & Princeton-educated scholar who wrote the award-winning \*Cynic Sage or Son of God\*](#), offered a [devastating critique of the Jesus Seminar, a group that questions whether Jesus said or did most of what’s attributed to Him. He identified the Seminar as “an extremely small number of radical-fringe scholars who are on the far, far left wing of New Testament thinking.”](#) The Seminar ruled out the possibility of miracles at the outset, employed questionable criteria, & some participants have touted [myth-riddled documents of extremely dubious quality](#). Further, the idea that stories about Jesus emerged from mythology fails to withstand scrutiny. Said Boyd: “The evidence for Jesus being Who the disciples said He was ... is just light years beyond my reasons for thinking that the left-wing scholarship of the Jesus Seminar is correct.” In sum, the Jesus of faith is the same as the Jesus of history.

#### • WAS JESUS REALLY CONVINCED HE WAS THE SON OF GOD?

By going back to the very earliest traditions, which are unquestionably safe from legendary development, Ben Witherington III, author of *The Christology of Jesus*, was able to show that [Jesus had a supreme & transcendent self-understanding](#). Based on the evidence, Witherington said: “Did Jesus believe He was the Son of God, the anointed one of God? The answer is yes. Did He see Himself as the Son of Man? The answer is yes. Did He see Himself as the final Messiah? Yes, that’s the way He viewed Himself. Did He believe that anybody less than God could save the world? No, I don’t believe He did.”

[Scholars said that Jesus’ repeated reference to Himself as the Son of Man was not a claim of humanity, but a reference to Dan.7:13-14, in which the Son of Man is seen as having universal authority & everlasting dominion & Who receives the worship of all nations.](#) Said one scholar: “Thus, the claim to be the Son of Man would be in effect a claim to divinity.”

#### • WAS JESUS CRAZY WHEN HE CLAIMED TO BE THE SON OF GOD?

Gary Collins, a [professor of psychology for 20 years & author of 45 books](#) on psychology-related topics, said Jesus exhibited no inappropriate emotions, was in contact with reality, was [brilliant & had amazing insights into human nature](#), & enjoyed deep & abiding relationships. “I just don’t see signs that Jesus was suffering from any known mental illness,” he concluded. In addition, [Jesus backed up His claim to being God through miraculous feats of healing, astounding demonstrations of power over nature, unrivaled teaching, divine understanding of people, & with His Own resurrection, which was the ultimate evidence of](#)

His deity.

### • DID JESUS FULFILL THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD?

While the incarnation—God becoming man, the infinite becoming finite—stretches our imaginations, prominent theologian D.A. Carson pointed out that there's lots of evidence that Jesus exhibited the characteristics of deity. Based on Philippians 2, many theologians believe Jesus [voluntarily emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes as He pursued His Mission of human redemption](#). Even so, the New Testament specifically confirms that Jesus ultimately possessed every qualification of deity, including omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, eternity, & immutability.

### • DID JESUS—& JESUS ALONE—MATCH THE IDENTITY OF THE MESSIAH?

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah, or the Anointed One, who would redeem God's people. In effect, dozens of these Old Testament prophecies created a fingerprint that only the true Messiah could fit. This [gave Israel a way to rule out imposters & validate the credentials of the authentic Messiah. Against astronomical odds—one chance in a trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion](#)—Jesus, & only Jesus throughout history, matched this prophetic fingerprint. This confirms Jesus' identity to an incredible degree of certainty. The expert I interviewed on this topic, Louis Lapidus, is an example of someone [raised in a conservative Jewish home](#) & who came to believe Jesus is the Messiah after a systematic study of the prophecies. Today, he's the pastor of a church in California & former president of a national network of 15 messianic congregations.

### • WAS JESUS' DEATH A SHAM & HIS RESURRECTION A HOAX?

By analyzing the medical & historical data, Dr. Alexander Metherell, a [physician who also holds a doctorate in engineering](#), concluded Jesus could not have survived the gruesome rigors of crucifixion, much less the gaping wound that pierced his lung & heart. In fact, [even before the crucifixion He was in serious to critical condition & suffering from hypovolemic shock](#) as the result of a horrific flogging. The idea that He somehow swooned on the cross & pretended to be dead lacks any evidential basis. [Roman executioners were grimly efficient, knowing that they themselves would face death if any of their victims were to come down from the cross alive. Even if Jesus had somehow lived through the torture, His ghastly condition could never have inspired a worldwide movement based on the premise that He had gloriously triumphed over the grave.](#)

### • WAS JESUS' BODY REALLY ABSENT FROM HIS TOMB?

William Craig, who has earned 2 doctorates & written several books on the Resurrection, presented striking evidence that the enduring symbol of Easter—the vacant tomb of Jesus—was a historical reality. The empty grave is reported or implied in extremely early sources—Mark's gospel & a creed in 1Cor.15—which date so close to the event that they could not possibly have been products of legend. The fact that the gospels report that women discovered the empty tomb bolsters the story's authenticity, because [women's testimony lacked credibility in the 1<sup>st</sup> century & thus there would have been no motive to report they found the empty tomb if it weren't true](#). The site of Jesus' tomb was known to Christians, Jews, & Romans, so it could have been checked by skeptics. [In fact, nobody—not even the Roman authorities or Jewish leaders—ever claimed that the tomb still contained Jesus' body](#). Instead, they were forced to invent the absurd story that the disciples, despite having no motive or opportunity, had stolen the body—a theory that not even the most skeptical critic believes today.

### • WAS JESUS SEEN ALIVE AFTER HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS?

The [evidence for the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus didn't develop gradually over the years as mythology distorted memories](#) of His life. Rather, said renowned Resurrection expert Gary Habermas, His resurrection was [“the central proclamation of the Early Church from the very beginning.”](#) The ancient creed

from 1Cor.15 mentions specific individuals who encountered the risen Christ, & Paul even challenged 1<sup>st</sup>-century doubters to talk with these individuals personally to determine the truth of the matter for themselves. The Book of Acts is littered with extremely early affirmations of Jesus' resurrection, while the gospels describe numerous encounters in detail. Concluded British theologian Michael Green: "The appearances of Jesus are as well authenticated as anything in antiquity.... There can be no rational doubt that they occurred."

• **ARE THERE ANY SUPPORTING FACTS THAT POINT TOWARD THE RESURRECTION?**

Professor J.P. Moreland presented circumstantial evidence that provided strong documentation for the Resurrection. First, the disciples were in a unique position to know whether the Resurrection happened, & they went to their deaths proclaiming it was true. Nobody knowingly & willingly dies for a lie. Second, apart from the Resurrection, there's no good reason why such skeptics as Paul & James would have been converted & would have died for their faith. Third, within weeks of the Crucifixion, thousands of Jews became convinced Jesus was the Son of God & began following Him, abandoning key social practices that had critical sociological & religious importance for centuries. They believed they risked damnation if they were wrong. Fourth, the early sacraments of Communion & Baptism affirmed Jesus' resurrection & deity. And fifth, the miraculous emergence of the church in the face of brutal Roman persecution "rips a great hole in history, a hole the size & shape of Resurrection," as C.F. Moule put it.

Taken together, I concluded that this expert testimony constitutes compelling evidence that Jesus Christ was Who He claimed to be—the one & only Son of God. The atheism that I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical truth.