THE FAITH
GIVEN ONCE, FOR ALL
JUDE 3

CHARLES COLSON
AND HAROLD FICKETT

FOREWORD BY ERIC METAXAS
CONTENTS

Foreword by Eric Metaxas / 5
Preface / 9
Prologue / 13

PART I
GOD AND THE FAITH
1. Everywhere, Always, by All / 21
2. God Is / 31
3. He Has Spoken / 41
4. Truth / 57
5. What Went Right, What Went Wrong / 71
6. The Invasion / 81
7. God Above, God Beside, God Within / 97

PART II
THE FAITH AND LIFE
8. Exchanging Identities / 113
9. Reconciliation / 129
10. The Church / 147
11. Be Holy — Transform the World / 159
12. The Sanctity of Life / 171
13. Last Things / 187
14. The Joy of Orthodoxy / 201
15. The Great Proposal / 209

Notes / 227
With Gratitude / 236
Remembrance / 238
Appendix: The Faith Given Once for All / 240
Index / 243
PART I

GOD AND THE FAITH
CHAPTER 1

EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS, BY ALL

What we witnessed at Nickel Mines and in the times of the Roman plagues is true Christianity — sacrificial love, concern for all people, forgiveness and reconciliation, evil overcome by good. These two examples, drawn from thousands I might have selected, represent signs of the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus and lived by His followers to this day.

Admittedly, Christianity has not always been practiced this way. Christians are fallen, flawed, and broken people who often profess one thing and do another. But contrary to the public misconceptions about Christianity today, the Christian Church and the truth it defends are the most powerful life- and culture-changing forces in human history. This enduring truth has been tested and proven true over two thousand years.

Christianity — The Enduring Truth

My wife, Patty, and I were visiting London on a ministry trip some years ago. We found a few free hours one day for sightseeing and visited Christopher Wren’s architectural masterpiece, St. Paul’s Cathedral, in the heart of the old city. Hundreds of visitors were milling around, looking at the art treasures and sculptures, admiring the grand rotunda above. One look at the narrow walkway curling upward into the dome cured us of any desire to climb the steps.

To our surprise, an Anglican Mass was being celebrated at the high altar and, interestingly, broadcast over the loudspeakers. Most of the
sightseers regarded it as little more than elevator music. But we made our way to a back pew and sat among perhaps a hundred other worshipers.

Although I am from a low-church tradition, I found myself caught up in the beauty of the liturgy, riveted by its scriptural basis. We decided to take a few minutes to sit quietly and enjoy the power of the Word in such a glorious setting.

We were caught up in the church's history. I remembered Winston Churchill's funeral had been conducted here in 1965, and we had visited the memorial chapel that commemorates the American contribution to winning World War II. The history of St. Paul's extends back through the centuries. Queen Elizabeth I (1533 – 1603) contributed to repairs after a lightning strike. A side chapel is dedicated to St. Dunstan, who almost single-handedly revived British Christianity in the tenth century after the Danish invasions, and no doubt he had a hand in the St. Paul's of his day.

When the service reached the acclamation — “Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!” — I was struck by the realization that the congregation and casual sightseers alike were listening to the heart of the Gospel, which was being proclaimed with force and power as it had been on this very spot for at least 1,400 years, when the first St. Paul's was built, and likely earlier, back to Roman times. The same Gospel — every doctrine — was rooted in Scripture, given by the apostles, and expressed in the creeds of the early Church. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

I whispered my thoughts to Patty, who nodded in agreement. The realization sent shivers up our spines. “The faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude v. 3) was being boldly proclaimed from this altar, and hundreds of unsuspecting tourists, if inadvertently, were soaking it in. It has always been this way and always will be!

Then I had a second moment of inspiration as I realized that our ancient faith provided answers to the deepest questions in the hearts of all those visiting St. Paul’s that day and to secularized Britain as a whole. This witness was being given in the heart of a cosmopolitan city and in a nation that has largely turned against God in increasingly desperate times. The Christian West is under assault by the twin challenges of secularism and radical Islam — whose roots have
some unsuspected likenesses. Only through Christianity, I believe, can Western Europe and America meet these desperate challenges.

Even as we sat there, radical Islam was transforming Britain’s capital into “Londonistan.” The city’s underground and buses were soon to be bombed by these radicals, confronting secular society with a religiously motivated challenge it could not comprehend. Only the God of love celebrated that day at St. Paul’s could provide the renewal needed.

Skipping a Stone across Ages and Cultures—
A Time-traveler Visits Christian Communities

The core beliefs that have united Christians for two thousand years certainly built Western civilization, but it is a mistake to think that Christianity belongs to Western culture. Christianity did not originate in the West and has never been confined to it. The core elements of the faith have brought about a tremendous unity in a diversity of cultures, as the renowned writer on Christian missions Andrew Walls demonstrates, imagining what a time-traveler would see if he dropped in on five Christian communities living in different cultures over the centuries.

First, the time-traveler visits the founding church in Jerusalem in AD 37. He notes that these new Christians are hard to distinguish from a branch of Judaism. They simply identify the Jewish teaching about the Messiah, the Son of Man, with Jesus of Nazareth. These Christians are mostly drawn from the ranks of tradesmen and laborers. They have large families, and their faith is marked by celebrations and by helping one another to face life’s material challenges.

Next, our time-traveler visits Christians about the time of the Council of Nicea in AD 325. These Christians are no longer Jewish but drawn from all over the Mediterranean world. Many of the leaders now practice celibacy. They are familiar with the ancient Jewish Scriptures but give equal value to writings that have been generated by their own community—the “New Testament.” The subject of their discussion centers, as did the first community’s, on the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Culturally, these two Christian communities are already worlds apart.
Our time-traveler then visits Irish monks of the sixth century. They practice such spiritual disciplines as fasting and praying for long hours with their arms outstretched in the form of a cross. They are otherworldly in a way the first two communities were not, but they have the same evangelical zeal; they want those near and far to understand Jesus’ significance as the Messiah. Some of their members are about to depart for the Scottish coast in tubby leather and wood boats, where they will call the Scottish clans to exchange their nature worship and bloody practices for the joys of heaven.

The time-traveler drops in on one of the great English missionary societies of the 1840s. Unlike the Irish monks, these Christians seek a spirituality marked by social activism instead of severe spiritual disciplines. While the monks lived on virtually nothing, these people are almost too well fed. But they feel exactly the same burden to spread the message. They are funding missions to the Far East, Oceania, and Africa. They are also working to improve conditions within their own society brought on by the Industrial Revolution.

Finally, the time-traveler comes to Lagos, Nigeria, in the 1980s. He sees white-robed Christians dancing and chanting their way through the streets. They call themselves Cherubim and Seraphim, and they invite their neighbors to experience the power of God. They are not social activists like the English. They fast like the Irish monks but more for specific benefits. They talk more about the Holy Spirit and His power to inspire preaching, bring healing, and provide personal guidance.

The time-traveler notes that, culturally, these five Christian groups could hardly be more different. Yet they think of themselves as connected, and indeed, their thinking is remarkably similar. They believe that in Christ the world has been rescued from the power of evil and death; they believe in God’s sovereignty over history; they make the same use of the Scriptures and of bread and wine and water.

Surprising historical connections among these groups come to mind as well — those activist English missionaries first brought the faith to the dancing Nigerians, for example. (Today, in a fitting reversal, these Nigerians and other peoples of the Global South are bringing the faith back to the West.) The Jews evangelized the Medi-
terranean Gentiles, from whom both Ireland and England received the faith. All five groups, despite cultural appearances, are part of the same legacy: the one Lord, one faith, one baptism they profess holds true for all.

Right Belief and Today’s Confusion

We call the core beliefs that have united Christians through the ages orthodoxy, or “right belief.” Understanding this faith, once entrusted for all, is critically important today, for we live in a time, as I realized in St. Paul’s, when Christians and the civilization they helped to build are under assault.

Surveying the press coverage over the last couple of years makes it clear that Christianity is reeling from a bruising and perhaps unprecedented attack by aggressive atheism—or what one critic ominously calls “anti-theism.” In 2006, Richard Dawkins, a clever and articulate Oxford evolutionary biologist, published The God Delusion, which took up near-permanent residence on the New York Times bestseller list. Dawkins considers religious instruction a form of child abuse and suggests that governments should put a stop to it. Tufts professor Daniel Dennett argues that religion is a dangerous toxin that may be poisoning believers. Similar books have appeared from Sam Harris (Letter to a Christian Nation) and the brilliant if caustic Christopher Hitchens (God Is Not Great). The title of Chris Hedges’ American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America could hardly be more direct. Regularly, critics liken politically active Christians to the Taliban.

This is not a fringe phenomenon. According to the Wall Street Journal, these authors sold close to a million books in one twelve-month period alone. Richard Dawkins, responsible for half of those sales, can attest to how lucrative attacking God has become. These critics say we are trying to “impose” our views on American life—that we want to create a “theocracy,” or a government run by the Church. But this is absurd; theocracy is contrary to the most basic Christian teaching about free will and human freedom. Christianity gave the
very idea of separation of Church and state to the West. And Christianity advances not by power or by conquest, but by love.  

**Postmodernism and the Death of Truth**

What’s really at issue here is a dramatic shift in the prevailing belief of Western cultural elites; we have come into a postmodern era that rejects the idea of truth itself. If there is no such thing as truth, then Christianity’s claims are inherently offensive and even bigoted against others. Tolerance, falsely defined as putting all propositions on an equal footing—as opposed to giving ideas an equal hearing—has replaced truth.

Millions acquiesce to the all-beliefs-are-equal doctrine for the sake of bettering their social position in our values-free, offend-no-one culture. But to succumb to this indifference is not to accept a tolerant or liberal view of Christianity; it is to embrace another religion, a belief in some supreme value—perhaps tolerance—but not in the God who is and who has spoken.

President Eisenhower, a great father figure of the post–World War II era, perfectly captured this spirit of the postwar age: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” In 2007, an Episcopal priest carried this view so far she became a Muslim and remained a priest, while publicly denying there was any inconsistency.

All the while, those making their truth claims are publicly demeaned with impunity. Christians are called “wing nuts” and “flat-earthers,” or as one major national paper famously put it: “Poor, uneducated, and easily led.”

**Clash of Civilizations**

Even as we provide a reasoned defense against postmodernist disbelief, we must renew our culture—the only true remedy to radical Islam’s aggression.
The West has been slowly, almost reluctantly, becoming aware of its clash with radical Islamists. Millions of fascist-influenced jihadists, feeding on revivalist teachings as a counter to Western decadence, seek death for infidels and global rule for Islam. Many Westerners would like all of this simply to disappear somehow. As the polls show, secular Europeans, for whom religion has become inconsequential, cannot fathom a religiously motivated challenge to their way of life. They and others like them throughout Europe and America are eager to deputize competent authorities to handle the problem, so they can get back to their pleasurable lives.

Others ask, “What can be done? Can anyone come up with a new plan or vision of things?” But neither complacency nor fear serves us well. We don’t need a new vision of things; rather, we need an eternal vision—to raise our eyes once again to the light that has always guided Christians during times of great distress. One of the greatest virtues of the Christian faith is that it is life affirming and culture building. No other worldview or religion protects the sanctity of life and human dignity as Christianity does; no other worldview has ever created as humane and progressive a culture as Christianity has. Our faith and our experience teach us that the power that created the universe can provide answers to today’s dilemmas.

**Challenge for the Church**

The challenges of anti-theism and radical Islam could not come at a worse time for the Church, because most Christians do not understand what they believe, why they believe it, and why it matters. How can a Christianity that is not understood be practiced? And how can it be presented in its true character as peace, freedom, and joy? How are skeptics to understand Christianity’s positive aspects?

Tragically, postmodern culture has infected and weakened the Church, particularly in the West. Spain, once the most Catholic country in Europe, has become, within a generation, among the most secularized. A recent report among Spain’s bishops lays the blame squarely on heretical teaching as to the nature of Christ and His atoning work. Likewise, when I asked a priest friend why church
membership was declining so rapidly in once rigidly Catholic Ireland, he answered, “Because the priests don’t preach the Gospel.”

Even evangelicals, known for their fidelity to Scripture, have not been exempt from postmodernist influence. Both George Gallup and George Barna, eminent pollsters and close Church observers, have in recent years decried the declining biblical literacy in the Church. The majority of evangelicals—who Barna calls “born-again Christians”—do not believe in absolute truth. Sixty percent of Americans can’t name five of the Ten Commandments; 50 percent of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married.8

I viewed these findings with some suspicion until I did my own survey in preparing for this book. Over the past two years, whenever I had occasion, I asked mature believers to name the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Many of them looked surprised, even perplexed. Of the twelve critical doctrines that I have identified in this book, most of my friends, admittedly unprepared, could name only four, at best five. One or two actually told me they thought that doctrine only confused, that we should simply focus on Jesus. Pastors were not much better informed than the laity; Barna found that 49 percent of Protestant pastors reject core biblical beliefs.9

On a number of occasions I have stopped in the middle of giving talks and asked, “What is Christianity anyway?” At one dinner in the Bible Belt, the group of mature believers hesitated for what seemed like a full minute of painful silence. No one volunteered.

Finally one man said, “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul.” I replied that was good, but only part of the whole. There followed three or four other answers, all based on what could be called broad scriptural truths, like the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.

These, I explained, are true but only parts of the whole. Christians must see that the faith is more than a religion or even a relationship with Jesus; the faith is a complete view of the world and humankind’s place in it. Christianity is a worldview that speaks to every area of life, and its foundational doctrines define its content. If we don’t know what we believe—even what Christianity is—how can we live it and defend it? Our ignorance is crippling us.
From the Beginning:
Mere Christianity

If the Church has any hope of answering today’s challenges, it must pursue what we call radical Christianity or orthodoxy. Radical is a good term; it means going back to the “root.” This is why throughout this book we will be sending you back to the writings of the apostles themselves and of Church leaders and theologians of the first five centuries of the Christian era.

If we are to face today’s grave threats to the Christian Church and to Western civilization, we must look across the sweep of Christian communions, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, to find the original consensus of the early Church; that is, those essential elements of our faith that, from the beginning, all true Christians have believed—what Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis meant by the title of his classic book Mere Christianity.

Centuries of Christian reflection and public debate have produced classic and lesser creeds that all say much the same. From the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed forward, the words differ little when addressing the great articles of faith. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession begins by explicitly citing the ancient Nicene Creed.

This unanimity didn’t happen by chance or as a result of secret cabals. Theology has always been a public activity. The nature of Christ was the subject of shoptalk throughout the later Roman Empire. People did not take sides lightly. Many, like Athanasius, risked their lives for the sake of the “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude v. 3).

It may seem odd to rely on the ancient roots of Christianity at a time when progress is so exalted. But progress does not always mean discovering something new. Sometimes it means rediscovering wisdom that is ancient and eternal. We all find our identity in our roots. Visit nearly any family and you’ll see pictures of grandparents and earlier generations. People go to great lengths to trace their ancestry. Adopted children seek their birth parents.

Where we come from tells us who we are, and so it is in the Church. A fifth-century monk from Gaul, St. Vincent of Lerins,
famously counseled: “Hold fast that faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.”

We pray that the Kingdom of God will rule in our hearts and once again transform the places in which we live. That will happen only by knowing and living the faith. To the best of our ability, then, here is what Christians believe, why we believe it, and why it matters. As you read on, carefully examine each of the propositions set forth with these three questions in mind and note how each proposition leads to the next, showing the internal coherence and logic of the Christian view, as compared to other belief systems. For whether you are a seeker or a believer, if you understand why each proposition matters and see their coherence, I’m confident you’ll be as convinced as I am that this is the truth you can stake your life on.

We begin, as does the faith, with this proposition: God is.
CHAPTER 2

GOD IS

One of the faith’s most persuasive contemporary critics is Sam Harris, who articulates the powerful doubts that we all know in our moments of soul searching. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he speaks of the losses the citizens of New Orleans suffered as a result of Hurricane Katrina:

But what was God doing while Katrina laid waste to their city? Surely he heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Do you have the courage to admit the obvious? These poor people died talking to an imaginary friend.¹

My thoughts have been as dark at times. In January 2005 I got the shocking news that my oldest son, Wendell, was diagnosed with cancer of the spine. The day of the surgery was the longest day of my life. Our family kept a vigil in the sterile hospital waiting room, jammed with other anxious families. We’d been warned that taking a tumor out of the spine is a delicate and lengthy operation. One hour passed, two, three. A friendly receptionist kept advising us that Wendell was still in surgery.

As the hours dragged by, we watched all the highs and lows of life played out on the stage before us — doctors in white coats and masks arriving to consult with other families in a small conference room, from which most emerged beaming and jubilant, but others sorely downcast. Although I did my best to cheer others in our family, after
six hours I thought my nerves could stand it no longer. *How can any operation take this long?*

Eleven hours later we were the last family left when the doctor finally arrived to give us a report. The tumor was excised, bone grafts and steel plates attached to the spine. The good news was that Wendell would not be mentally or physically impaired, as we had feared. But later we learned that cancer cells had remained in the spine. A yearlong debilitating regimen of chemotherapy and radiation—massive doses of each—was to follow.

While Wendell was recuperating in the spring, my daughter Emily discovered a black mole on her leg that turned out to be melanoma, moderately advanced, potentially deadly. So I was soon back in the same hospital for Emily’s surgery. Wendell was there at the time, receiving his chemotherapy, so I spent several hours shuttling between my two sick children—any parent’s ultimate nightmare.

In still other ways, 2005 was a tough year, including a major surgery for my wife, Patty, and extra struggles with my ministry. At night I would pace the floor and question God. How and why could all of this be happening? Hadn’t I served Him faithfully for thirty years? Wasn’t I responsible for a ministry reaching hundreds of thousands around the world? Didn’t He hear my prayers? I was spiritually drained and exhausted—as if I’d wrestled with demons in the darkness. Where was God when I needed Him?

In late August, Patty and I took a weeklong break at a friend’s home in western North Carolina. One morning I got up early and walked out on the deck. I was greeted by the magnificent sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains rising out of the mist, the sun throwing the shadows of the lower peaks against the higher summits, the foliage glistening with dew. The scene took my breath away. I was seeing God’s magnificent creation as if it were newborn. There was no explanation for what I was seeing—the intricate details of nature, genuine beauty—apart from a creator God. This could not be an illusion, an accident, or the result of some random process. While the other planets are sterile and lifeless, this one throbs with life and beauty. *God is.* I knew God exists at a deeper level than I had ever known anything in my life before. His existence didn’t depend on
my feelings, either. I might feel desperate, weary of praying, ready to throw in the towel, but God still is. There is no other explanation for reality. What I saw, I realized, was the answer to what I had thought were unanswered prayers.

Anyone looking at the majesty of the mountains or the vastness of the churning seas or the quiet beauty of a sunset has to wonder about the origins of what they see, and question, as we all do, where we humans came from.

Three Ideas of Origin

Theory #1: A Godless Material Universe

Today, three major ideas compete about the universe’s origin. The first is that the material universe is the sum and substance of all that exists and that it has either always existed or it came into existence without a cause. Therefore, natural explanations suffice to answer all questions about the nature and origin of the universe and of life.

The idea that the universe has always existed goes back to the Greek philosophers and was dominant for much of Western history. When the idea of a static eternal universe was shown to be false by Einstein’s general theory of relativity,* the material theory took refuge in a universe that expands and collapses in a cycle with no beginning or end. But recent discoveries have virtually invalidated this idea. (There is not enough mass-energy in the universe for gravity to halt its expansion, for example.)

Materialists who accept that the universe—or “multiverse,”† as some theories frame it—has an absolute beginning, as in the Big Bang, are stuck with pulling the rabbit of creation out of a nonexistent hat, that is, out of absolute nothingness. In this view, galaxies, supernovas, and black holes are merely the result of chance combinations taking place over immense stretches of time. Likewise, the structure of matter itself, with its basis in atomic and subatomic

* As well as by Hubble’s observation of the universe’s expansion, and Penzias’s and Wilson’s discovery of the cosmic microwave echo from the Big Bang.
† According to chaotic inflationary cosmology.
particles, springs from forces that must be considered purely random. In the same way, while all of life is based on highly complex arrangements of information, called DNA, life must be considered simply the product of blind, unintelligible chance, when a single cell popped into existence in the primordial sea.

The material theory leaps from nonexistence to intelligible existence to information-based life on the basis—literally—of nothing.

Theory #2: God Is an Intelligent Presence in All Things, a Universal Mind

Our universe has an intelligible character for which the material theory cannot account. It can be investigated, reasoned about, and its phenomena translated into elegant mathematical expressions, like Einstein’s $E = MC^2$. How can the intelligible, the predictable, and the uniform emerge out of pure chance?

Some try to cope with this dilemma by contending that life’s origin is based in reason or a Universal Mind. That’s why Greek philosophy embraced the concept of the logos, an ultimate creative reason as the source of all things. It’s also why many of the greatest scientists have concluded that an ultimate intelligence must be present in all things, if not behind them. Einstein called for a “cosmic religiosity … enraptured wonder at the harmony of the laws of nature … a deep faith in the rationality of the structure of the world.”

This is one of today’s prominent ideas, not only among scientists but among those interested in Eastern religions. The faiths of the East often see the material world as expressing an underlying spiritual unity. Books discussing the convergence of modern physics and Eastern religion line the shelves.

Believers in a Universal Mind usually see their god and the universe as synonymous and assume an attitude of reverence toward creation; they join environmental groups and even flock to mountain tops to experience the “harmonic convergence” of natural forces. Often they see the world’s evolution as the way in which this universal intelligence comes to consciousness.

This view leaves the human mind without any real purpose. Scientists who believe in a Universal Mind, as Einstein did, are strict...
determinists — they don’t believe people make their own decisions. Einstein rejected any conception of a personal God as “anthropomorphic” and detested the “religion of fear” and “religion of morality” a personal God inspires. He thought human beings were no more responsible for their own actions than a chicken laying an egg.

**Theory #3: A Personal God**

Christians believe that the most likely explanation for a reasonable universe and one in which we experience ourselves as free can be found in a reasonable, personal God. As I said, Greek philosophy embraced the concept of *logos*, an ultimate creative reason as the source of all things. The Gospel of John applies this concept to Christ, as the *Logos* or Word of God through whom all things came to be (John 1:1–3).

Christians see the creation as an indicator of God’s character. When we look at nature, we are immediately impressed by its creativity and beauty. Think for a moment of chameleons with their independently bobbling eyes, or deep-sea creatures that glow to light their own way. Apple blossoms and honey bees cooperate to assure that fruit develops and the bees are sustained. Nature is incredibly varied and astoundingly beautiful.

The beauty of the world gives us a primary clue about the character of this *Logos*, often defined as the plan of creation. The scientist may look at the white clouds of apple blossoms as nothing more than an adaptive response, but if only an adaptive response were required, then why this dazzling display? And why should the ingenious cooperation of the blossoms and bees be called for?

I certainly had to ask myself why this world should reveal such glory when the earth sprang up anew before my eyes that morning in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Could I deny that “the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1)? Christians wonder why beauty should exist in such abundance if the creative reason did not mean to communicate love.

Only a creative reason, or *Logos*, does justice to our experience of the world. Further, only a *Logos* that is both unimaginably creative and
loving accounts for our delight in the world. When we see the Logos as the source of creation and yet independent of it, when we reflect on the world’s beauty and our own freedom, the Logos quickly assumes the character of the personal God described in the Scriptures. We have reason to confess, “In the beginning, God…” (Genesis 1:1).

The choice we make among these three options as to the universe’s origin is the most important choice in life. Everything else follows from it. It’s the place where the search for the truth begins.

**Considering the Three Choices**

Few people actually think through these choices; rather, most are influenced by cultural prejudice, as I discovered a few years back when I attended an exclusive dinner the night before a governor’s prayer breakfast.

The gentleman seated next to me greeted me with a blunt warning that he was an atheist. I looked at him for a moment — graying temples, a wise expression, handsomely attired — the very image of a community leader. I told him I was glad to sit next to him because “I’ve never really met an atheist.”

As his eyebrows arched, I explained, “An atheist believes the existence of God can be disproved. So please, tell me how you’ve done that.”

He looked momentarily uncomfortable. “Well, perhaps I should say I’m an agnostic.”

“When did you give up studying about God?” I asked.

Now his neck began to redden. He admitted he’d really never tried. “But an agnostic is one who says he doesn’t think God can be known, and you can only be an agnostic if you’ve tried to know Him and exhausted the search.” I’m not sure even now what made me so bold, but I added, “So I would say that while you appear to be a very well-educated person, you’ve made an unsupportable statement.”

Not surprisingly, he was offended and rather quiet for the rest of the evening.
Some weeks later I received a copy of the editorial page of the state's largest newspaper. It turned out my dinner companion was the publisher. His lead editorial was an explanation of how my visit had affected his view of life, how religion was indeed an important element of all of our lives and something we needed to pursue. What struck the publisher was that his own point of view proved unsupported.

Okay, that was simply a clever debating ploy, the reader may say. But it doesn’t answer modern science, which has rendered belief in a personal God irrational. As Freud said, it is simply “wish fulfillment,” or as Richard Dawkins describes it in his bestseller, “a delusion.” A recent character on television captured the conventional wisdom: “I’d like to believe in God, but I’d have to leave my mind at the door.”

The Proposition That “God Is”

One of the great philosophers of our day, Alvin Plantinga, has engaged his secular contemporaries in frequent debates over the rationality of asserting the first presupposition that God is. Most secular philosophers, who are scientific materialists—they believe only in physical phenomena and a material universe—challenge him and say there is no support for what he says.

Plantinga’s response is to ask the philosophers whether they believe that other people have minds. Is this rational? The philosophers say yes. But Plantinga points out that individuals who call themselves solipsists each believe that they alone have a mind. (One has to wonder how solipsists communicate with others who have no minds.)

Plantinga argues that saying God exists is as rational as saying other people have minds. Both philosophical conclusions are logical in the same way. Since all basic presuppositions begin with faith, God is is as rational as any other first premise.

Evidence that points toward the intelligent design of the universe increases the probability that God is. The more that is learned of the structure of the billions of human cells that make up our body, the clearer it is that cells function based on intelligent information, DNA, that is more complicated, as Bill Gates has said, than any software ever written. And there is now abundant cosmological evidence
that this planet is uniquely hospitable to human life—the unique orbit of the earth, the distance from the sun, and the like. It is as if, one scientist wrote, “the universe in some sense must have known that we were coming.”\textsuperscript{5}

The presupposition God is is today not without abundant supporting empirical evidence. It requires no flight from reason to believe it.

**Is God Is Irrational?**

But what about the frequently heard charge that belief in God is irrational? All of the current books of the anti-theists stress this. Is choosing God an irrational selection when its effects are considered?

Roman citizens could see that Christianity offered real tangible benefits that pagan religions did not. In the midst of the widespread plagues, urban squalor, and general hopelessness of Rome, Christians lived a profoundly different and more hopeful life. When people witnessed their flourishing families and healthy lifestyles, contrasted with pagan decadence, they rationally decided that Christianity was a better choice as to how they would live their lives.\textsuperscript{6}

In modern times we see the same phenomenon at work.\textsuperscript{7} In the early 1990s people in South America chose the evangelical, largely Pentecostal, faith for a very good reason: it resulted in changed behavior in a way that benefited the family. Women, for example, who were accustomed to their husbands going to the tavern at night and leaving them alone, suddenly discovered that when those husbands were converted they stayed home with the family. The word spread. They joined the churches that promoted personal conversions and transformed lives. The choice was informed by the evident results the choice produced. This exactly meets the criteria of secular social scientists as to what constitutes a rational choice.\textsuperscript{8}

But even if we believe we are making rational choices, aren’t we coloring our judgment by desiring a God we can turn to in time of need? Aren’t we just engaging in an irrational wish fulfillment, as Sam Harris, viewing the tragic consequences of Hurricane Katrina, would have it? Wasn’t that my situation when I stood on that porch,
God Is distraught over my children, engaging in an emotional and subjective wish fulfillment?

But the knowledge of God is innate within human beings—it’s born into us (Genesis 1:26–27; Romans 1:18 and following). Today, even secular biologists and scientists studying the human mind have found strong evidence of this intuitive knowledge—what some have even called the God gene. This need to connect to God and to one another was documented in a recent scholarly study entitled The God Gene. We are made to seek meaning beyond ourselves in ways a purposeless, random process could not explain.

That this is wired into us doesn’t mean we all experience the same delusion or engage in wish fulfillment. It more likely means we are made this way because what we long for is real. As C. S. Lewis, the great Oxford scholar and apologist, argued, all humans are by nature hungry because food has been made to satisfy our hunger. We don’t make up hunger and food to satisfy our fancies; we are made for it.

But Dawkins will have none of this. We are beguiled by the God delusion, he says, calling the biblical Yahweh “psychotic” and Aquinas’s proofs of God’s existence “fatuous” and religion “nonsense.”

This is how Dawkins explains that belief in God is not rational: “Any God capable of designing a universe, carefully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity that needs an even bigger explanation than the one He is supposed to provide.” “Thus,” Dawkins says, “He’s ruled out by the laws of probability.” Dawkins is saying God can’t be God because He is beyond our comprehension. But this is precisely the nature of God by definition—the classic ontological argument advanced by St. Anselm that God is that which is beyond what the human mind can comprehend. Isaiah 55 tells us, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord (v. 8).

Dawkins says that he chooses to live as if God does not exist. But at the same time, he concedes that on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being certainty that God exists, and 7 certainty He doesn’t, Dawkins rates himself a 6, at least acknowledging that he cannot prove his position. But even a one-in-seven chance that life has meaning is better than a zero-in-seven chance. Blaise Pascal, one of the great philosophers of
modern history, argues that if there is no God, and you bet your life there is, you’ve lost nothing. But if there is a God, and you bet your life there isn’t, you’ve made the greatest mistake imaginable. I’m sure if Dr. Dawkins had been on the Titanic and was offered two lifeboats, one certain to sink as opposed to one with a one-in-seven chance of staying afloat, he would have instantly chosen the latter. To choose the boat with no hope would be clearly irrational.

If the choice God is rational, why do people refuse it? Mortimer Adler, editor of the Great Books series and surely an intellectual giant in his time, accepted the rational conclusion that Christianity was true. But when asked why he hadn’t converted, he said he wasn’t “prepared to give up all [the] vices and the weaknesses of the flesh.”

Soon after making that statement, Adler saw the irrationality of his position, recognized that his own will was the problem, and surrendered his life to Christ. He was baptized, and in his later years joined the Catholic Church.

What we choose really does matter. If we live in an exclusively material world, human life—including mine and yours—is absolutely meaningless. No matter how intense our passions, how great our accomplishments, or what side of history we choose, all of this will turn to dust in a universe doomed to extinction. Nothing apart from God counts, as Solomon so eloquently wrote four thousand years ago in Ecclesiastes—words that ring true today.

But if there is a personal Creator, if God is, then His creation can reflect His character; it can reveal God’s purposes for us. Our lives instantly gain meaning. The world becomes a means of knowing God as well as our dwelling place. We can truly be the reasoning, imaginative, creative persons we believe ourselves to be.

How we understand ourselves and the world around us determines the kind of life we make. The early Christians showed us this as they swabbed the foreheads of plague victims; so have the Amish. Whether we believe that God is affects not only our families and our culture, but world history. But how do we know how we are to live in this world God has given us?
When we say that God is “personal,” we mean, at the very least, that He is rational, purposeful, self-aware, and, above all, that He communicates. The loving God of Christianity reveals not only His own character but how He wants humankind to live in creation. Whether and how God has spoken may seem at first an abstract question, but it’s a matter of life and death, as the following stories show.

Scillium, North Africa, AD 180

The runner brought the message that soldiers were on their way. Speratus, a silversmith, had to decide whether to take the church’s sacred scrolls with him to jail. He went to the cedar chest where they were kept and began loading them into a satchel. The noise in the street grew louder until the rumble accompanying the legion to Speratus’s door sounded like a stampede. Would the scrolls be safer with him or in hiding? Lately, the Roman authorities had been searching out, seizing, and burning the writings the Christian community considered authoritative—the letters of Paul and the four Gospels. To not guard these writings was in the eyes of the Church an act of betrayal—a renunciation of the faith and the hope of heaven.

Speratus was a Roman citizen with rights. Above all, the pagans would want him to recant his beliefs and would probably let him keep the letters with him as an inducement. He decided to take them along. The best hiding place is often right out in the open.

The emperor, Marcus Aurelius, had been scapegoating the Christian community, blaming them for the famine afflicting the empire,
which resulted in persecutions as far as Gaul, where Christians were put on racks and dragged down onto beds of spikes, among many other grisly tortures. But Marcus Aurelius had died the previous month in March. His successor, Commodus, was said to be much more favorably disposed to the Christians because he had a concubine in his household who had converted. Word might come through any day that the persecutions were to cease. If Speratus could keep the letters of Paul safe for only a short time, they might remain in the church’s possession. Speratus himself might even walk out of prison unharmed.

The announcement of his arrest was being called out to the town before his door. Speratus gave his wife, Lucy, and his children a quick embrace, then hurried out to the guard before they harmed his family.

Only in prison would Speratus fully understand why he had been led to take the letters of Paul with him into captivity. The Romans rounded up twelve members of the Scillium church: seven men, Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius; and five women, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, and Secunda. They were kept in a cavelike dungeon underneath the Roman garrison. They sang songs and prayed together against the fear that felt weightier than their chains. They fed on the words Paul wrote before his own martyrdom.

Speratus’s attention was particularly drawn to the concluding passages of Paul’s first letter to Timothy: “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:12 – 14).

Speratus’s name meant “hope.” Now, in the darkness, he tried to look past his fear to a hope that could survive the grave.
In July, the Christians of Scillium were brought to the African province's capital, Carthage.* Six of the twelve were examined in the judgment hall on July 17 by Proconsul Vigellius Saturninus. Images of the emperor and incense were brought into the hall so that the accused Christians could offer sacrifice to pagan Rome.

Saturninus told Speratus that he still might regain his freedom. “Swear by the genius of our Lord the Emperor.”

Speratus thought of Paul's admonition to Timothy and paraphrased it in reply. “I cannot worship the empire of this world,” he said, “but rather I serve that God, whom no man has seen, nor with these eyes can see. I know my Lord, the King of Kings and Emperor of all nations.”

“Do you truly believe this?” Saturninus asked the others. “Don't you understand it means your deaths?”

Cittinus said, “We fear nothing and no one, except our Lord God, who is in heaven.”

Saturninus became curious and asked what Speratus had in the satchel he carried.

“Books and epistles of Paul, a just man.”

The Proconsul took Speratus's belief in Paul's writings as a capitol offense against Rome's justice. “These men and women,” Saturninus declared, “having confessed that they live according to the Christian rite, and having obstinately refused the opportunity to return to the traditions of Rome, are to be put to the sword.”

The Christians of Scillium responded, “Thanks be to God.”

The fame of the Scillitan martyrs, as they came to be known, spread throughout the empire. No doubt the letters of Paul that Speratus was carrying were burned, but the Scillitan martyrs are remembered for their absolute trust in the Word of God. A basilica was eventually built in their honor at Carthage (present day Tunis).

*In the present day, Tunis, Tunisia.
Henan Province, China, 1974

During Mao’s Cultural Revolution in China another Christian community faced a hostile empire. Red Guards, mostly university and high school students, flooded into cities, towns, and villages and systematically persecuted anyone they believed in violation of Mao Tse-tung’s Thought. As many as 100 million people were victimized through torture and imprisonment in forced-labor camps; 1 million were executed. To be caught in possession of a Bible meant torture and imprisonment at the very least.

A visitor to Henan Province in those days would have seen scrupulously quiet villages with women outside of ramshackle homes doing the washing or sweeping away the dust. A few of these women were actually lookouts, as groups of Christians risked death by studying the Scriptures together. The house church of a village in Henan Province was blessed if it had one copy of the Bible. The texts used for Bible study were hand-copied sheets. The community’s Bible was often protected by being broken into several portions and distributed among different houses. If one house was raided and its Scriptures confiscated, the community would not lose the entire Bible. To secure more copies, the entire Bible was frequently hand copied, sometimes by teams of people who worked around the clock. When confiscating raids seized their Scriptures, the people of Henan would in desperation dig up the graves of Christians who had been buried with their Bibles before 1949. These copies would be mostly illegible from damp and decay, but the Christians of Henan longed even for fragments.

During the years of Mao’s rule the patriarchs, or “uncles,” of the Chinese house church movement were imprisoned. Perhaps the greatest among these Chinese patriarchs, Wang Mingdao, was arrested for a second time on April 29, 1958. He spent the next twenty-two years in prison. During the Cultural Revolution his treatment became especially brutal. He wore handcuffs for four months straight and was beaten daily. When asked how in old age he had endured, he said, “The Word.” The same could be said of the entire Chinese Church.

In 1949 when Mao came to power, there were about 4 million Christians in China. Today, there are reportedly over 100 million.
Henan Province, once considered an “atheistic zone,” was said by the authorities to have caught “Christianity fever.” Other provinces, including Anhui and Hebei, came to be known as “Jesus nests.” There are probably as many evangelical Christians today in China as there are in the United States. In the last thirty years China’s Christians have triumphed through suffering much in the way the first Christians did in Rome. No better example of an “emerging church” can be found!

And why? Could there be a better explanation than to imagine one of Henan’s young women holding a hand-copied chapter of John’s Gospel in her shaking but grateful hands?

Arrayed against the faithful in their evangelical house churches and the underground Catholics were state-church collaborationists. What did they preach? A theological liberalism “infused” with Marxist-Leninist-Mao Tse-tung Thought. These collaborators decried the “fundamentalists” and mocked their love of the Scriptures.

I asked a China expert why Christianity took its genuine great leap forward during the darkest days of the Cultural Revolution. He said, “Light shines in darkness.”

The Recurring Battle

Why have I related these stories? Separated by eighteen centuries, the stories of the Scillitan martyrs and of the Chinese house church movement during the Cultural Revolution involve the same dynamics—Christians defending the Word of God, enemies doing their best to destroy it and persecuting Christians for cherishing it. These identical dynamics have come into play whenever in its two thousand-year history the Church has faced a hostile culture. Think of these stories as bookends, if you will, of Christian history. They illuminate the struggle that began with the early Church and continues to this day, always with the same battle lines over God’s Word.

Just as in ancient North Africa, Christians today in North Korea, much of the Muslim world, and elsewhere risk violent punishment for even possessing the Scriptures. Pakistani Christians must hide their Bibles or endure severe attacks by imams and roving gangs.
In America and elsewhere in the West, the Bible continues to be attacked, if more subtly. Every Christmas and Easter the media run programs with titles like “Who was Jesus?” Their advertising suggests that new scholarly discoveries transcend the narrow confines of faith and provide a greater truth devoid of the supernatural. Conspiracy theory books like *The Da Vinci Code* and articles related to the publication of ancient Gnostic texts like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas abound. (The Gospel of Judas, touted as a great discovery, was actually rejected as heretical by Church Father Irenaeus in approximately AD 180.) Skeptics claim that the New Testament was cobbled together by religious leaders for their own benefit. The Bible, they say, was simply one version among many of Jesus’ life and teachings and therefore cannot be trusted.

Postmodernists, in fact, trust no writings, believing that history is nothing but a record of cultural prejudice, having been written by history’s victors, particularly white Anglo-Saxon males. What’s more, any truth claim, particularly one about ultimate reality, is offensive in this relativistic era. This has resulted in a cultural atmosphere in which to say one believes in the Bible is to invite derision. Even a Supreme Court justice like Antonin Scalia—one of the brightest intellects in the country—cannot acknowledge believing in Jesus’ resurrection without being vilified and called too gullible to serve on the Court.

So what is it about this book, the Bible, that causes people to give their lives for it, causes oppressors to try to destroy it, and so infuriates the cultural elite today?

Clearly, the Bible is unique. Over the centuries many great books have been written, including those by Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and on and on; they have had an influence, of course. But no book, not even Karl Marx’s *Das Capital*, has ever caused the controversy aroused by the Bible or invited such severe resistance or inspired its followers to such extraordinary actions.

The reason is what the Bible claims for itself. Although it is in many respects a book like many others, a collection of ancient writings that includes a variety of genres from historical narrative to introspective philosophy, it is much more; it purports to be the Word of
God itself. Through this book God speaks, giving us an understanding of reality that transcends anything that can be envisioned by the human mind alone. The Bible, written by men but through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives us God’s eternal perspective on the world—truth not bound by any time or place (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

This is why Christians defend the Bible with their very lives. And since the Bible calls followers to an allegiance higher than the state, tyrants seek to destroy it.

Christians find that the Bible’s authority, its textual integrity, its historical accuracy, and its transformative power attest to its unique status as God’s Word.

**By the Power of the Holy Spirit**

When you understand the Bible’s origins, you understand why Christians through the ages have trusted their lives to it. Many Christians today, especially evangelicals, have little understanding of Church history. Many imagine that the Bible came into existence when God gave His Word to a group of scribes who bound and published it in a first-century publishing firm.

But remember, Jesus and His disciples were well versed in and abided by the Old Testament, the ancient law that had been handed down by God to the covenant people and meticulously recorded and maintained. It was their first “Bible.” The apostles recognized that Jesus’ teaching did not abolish but fulfilled these sacred Jewish texts. As time went on, however, the apostles recognized they needed to maintain authoritative accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, as well as the implications of Jesus’ life and teaching for Christian doctrine and life. Within twenty years of Jesus’ ascension this process began and the end result is what we now know as the New Testament. The story of the New Testament’s creation is a remarkable and faith-affirming account, detailing the meticulous way in which the written Scripture was documented and preserved.

This was possible only with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Remember that before Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples were caught up in their own longings for an earthly messianic kingdom. And even after
the resurrection, in the moments before Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the disciples asked, “Will you now restore the Kingdom to Israel?”

But at Pentecost human reason was elevated so that men could truly grasp the truth of God. Within moments of the holy fire falling upon them, the apostles fully understood the implications of Jesus’ statement: “Those who have seen me have seen the Father.” The apostles, led by Peter, rushed out into the marketplace to declare the truth of the risen Lord to all.

The opening chapters of Acts proclaim the heart of the Christian faith only forty days after the shattering event of Jesus’ crucifixion. Thereafter, the apostles obeyed Jesus’ commission to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20). From the first there was a specific propositional content to this faith—a declaration of God’s nature. God had spoken and His Word was knowable.

For the remainder of the first century, the fledgling Christian Church was taught directly about the faith through Peter, Paul, and the other apostles, although martyrdom soon began thinning their ranks. Leaders like Timothy, Clement, and Polycarp would take their leaders’ batons. The direct transmission of the faith from one church leader to another continued with meticulous care.

The Canon

The young Church first embraced the written records from Paul’s careful explication of Jesus’ teaching. Paul’s letters to individual churches were copied and exchanged among all church communities. Not long after his death in AD 66 or 67 every new center of the Church had a set of the most recognized letters of Paul. In the same way, manuscripts with the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, circulated and were copied by the churches and were quickly accepted as authoritative.

Soon, many other accounts of Jesus’ life and Paulinelike letters claiming apostolic authorship began appearing, which often included false teachings like Gnosticism—the idea that salvation comes by
way of a higher knowledge rather than surrendering the will to Christ. The leaders of church communities needed criteria by which to distinguish authoritative writings from heretical texts. The major standard employed was whether the documents faithfully communicated the apostles’ teaching, even—as in the case of Luke—where the texts were not written by apostles. This was called the “rule of faith.” Strict adherence to the apostolic witness decided what writings should be accepted as authoritative and thus “handed down” as approved for the worshiping community.

By the end of the second century nearly 90 percent of what came to be known as the New Testament was accepted by Christians as apostolic and divinely inspired, and hence authoritative. Discussions surrounding the remaining books continued in the third and fourth centuries alongside the debates that led to the formulation of the ancient creeds of the Church—the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian. Following the example that began in New Testament times, when Peter, Paul, and James met with leaders in Jerusalem to adopt ethical guidelines for new Gentile converts (Acts 15), the early Church leaders met together for prayer, reflection, and decision making.

The Church continued this participatory practice as debates ensued about what books should be included in the New Testament, with the major centers of the new church, Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch, each contributing their own lists. The Christian Bible, it is important to remember, was assembled over four centuries of the most painstaking study, open debate, discussion, and research. Remember, too, that the early New Testament scholars who participated in these discussions were close in time to the events of the New Testament, many having been taught directly by the apostles or their immediate successors.

Out of these deliberations important understandings could be achieved that continue to guide us to this day. The early Church scholars, for example, recognized that the four Gospels presented Jesus’ life in different sequences with different audiences in mind; but this was seen not as a conflict or a liability, as argued in the current wave of anti-theist books, but as a strength, because the diversity
in the accounts gave a fuller understanding of the faith and served to guard against narrow, misleading interpretations.

From the hand of Athanasius came the first extant list that included exactly the twenty-seven books we have today in the New Testament. Athanasius was also the theologian who did so much to secure our understanding of Christ as fully God and fully man. Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin, led the synod that in AD 382 confirmed this list.

Similarly, the Old Testament canon derived from the same kind of lively debate and intense scrutiny. It came from two main sources, the Hebrew Bible as it existed in Jerusalem, and a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek known as the Septuagint produced by scholars in Alexandria.13

By the time the New Testament canon— the official compilation of books— was accepted by all Christians, the Christian Bible was the most studiously examined proclamation of a faith ever compiled. Understanding how carefully the consensus, guided by the Holy Spirit, was reached explains why still today in discussions among Protestants, Catholics, and the Orthodox, so many common affirmations can be made; we after all rely on the same history, the carefully maintained records of the first five centuries of the Church’s life, known as the Patristic Era. This era enjoyed the purest understanding of the Christian faith and the greatest unity and thus, according to many scholars, provides the most reliable resource for fully understanding biblical revelation.

This laborious and careful process also explains why the Bible has proved so enduring. Over the past fifteen centuries the text has been translated into innumerable languages and, apart from an occasional word or phrase changed for clarity, has remained essentially unchanged. Neither persecution nor so-called enlightened skeptics have shaken confidence in it. This is why thousands have been willing to lay down their lives for the Bible, from the Scillitan martyrs to the persecuted Church today. All true Christians affirm that God has spoken; that the Bible is the Word of God.
Where do you turn when the critics and cynics question the very existence of God and the Christian faith? Charles Colson explains the foundations of faith, bridging the gap between belief, understanding and life. Be inspired and enlightened as you engage in powerful accounts of personal transformation that passionate, intelligent believers have made for centuries, and still make every day. Believe more strongly. Love more deeply. Serve more passionately. Read The Faith. Live The Faith.

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