

quick to listen

UNDERSTANDING VIEWPOINTS THAT
CHALLENGE YOUR FAITH



“Everyone should be quick to listen.”
(James 1:19)

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Samuel Degner | Christopher Doerr
Nick Schmoller | Luke Thompson

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Cover Photos: Openculture.com, Pixabay, Shutterstock, Twenty20
Art Director: Karen Knutson
Designer: Pamela Dunn

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Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
www.nph.net

© 2018 Northwestern Publishing House
Published 2018

Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-0-8100-2913-2
ISBN 978-0-8100-2914-9 (e-book)

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FOREWORD

This is not an easy book. You should know, dear reader, what you've gotten yourself into.

In these pages, our writers have asked real, flesh-and-blood people just exactly what it is that they find so implausible about Christianity, in part or in total. These interviews open up a space for atheists and evolutionists, Bible skeptics and practicing homosexuals (among others) to freely voice their viewpoints from various positions outside of biblical truth. After the interviews are quotations from a variety of popular thinkers and gifted writers who represent the broader intellectual climate as they chime in their hollow "amen."

And you are being asked to hear them—truly hear them—to take in their stories, to acknowledge the humanity of people who disagree with you, to let them get under your skin. It's even possible that some stereotypes might explode along the way, for example, if it should come as a surprise to you that they can be quite nice and interesting people. These conversations are not without good humor and genuine tolerance. Yes, there's some sarcasm here too, and no small amount of pain. Each person, in his or her own way, will step out from the undifferentiated crowd of "postmoderns" or "agnostics" or whatever other label might apply. They make themselves unforgettable.

Listening to them will be, in a word, uncomfortable.

*It is uncomfortable even briefly to imagine your way into a Christless framework, to look around and take in that smaller world, and to think of (or in some cases, to remember) what it is like to not believe. After all, we are not dealing here with the denial of some abstraction, but with the denial of your Brother and your Lord, your Savior and theirs. How long would I casually discuss the matter of, let's say, whether my bride is faithful to me? To be dispassionate about **that**, to listen politely, or even to take up such a conversation at all, well, in the very act I would allow our relationship to slip into something other than what it is meant to be. I do not want to speak idly and lightly of the destruction of a deep, precious, and abiding trust in someone who has brought me*

immeasurable joys. Yes, that conversation would be uncomfortable—and intensely personal. How much more when it comes to the matter of Jesus—does he live for us or does he not?—when what is at stake is precisely everything!

*With that in mind, it may be that what gets to you, like it gets to me, is what our generous participants are **not** saying, indeed, what they seem not to know. Not a single one of those who left Christianity outright (not all the participants are in this category) describes a time when the full beauty of Jesus broke through, like nothing this world contains, made more real to them by Word and Spirit than any competing vision of the good. You will catch in their comments much talk about some dimly recalled church and all the reasons they don't look back. If they have ever known the astonishment of forgiveness—as the only sun in their sky, of being dressed in Jesus' own righteousness, having found none of their own—they aren't saying. Have they ever once tasted, in Christ, the very beyond reason to wait in hope, to doubt their doubts, to take every thought captive to him as to the one thing they could not do without? It doesn't seem so. What, then, to make of the accounts they offer to us?*

It is probably not safe to assume that the conversations you are about to read necessarily arrived at the whole story or got down to “what it's really all about” for these people. That would be asking a lot of a single encounter, no matter how much trust was achieved, how penetrating the questions, or how open the disclosures.

Besides the limits of these single encounters, there are the limits of self-understanding, especially of those who have not yet at all seen themselves how God sees them. It is just as Jesus said. People simply do not want to come into the light because of the way their life would be exposed, naked and quivering, in that unrelenting brightness. Certainly, other reasons coexist and should not surprise us, even as we have each learned to be suspicious of ourselves. But the truth is that they, like the rest of us, are in the wrong—fully, awfully, and completely. It is we, not God, who are on trial. To think otherwise is the great miscalculation. And when the verdict comes down—Not Guilty for Jesus' sake—and the soul first learns who God is and what the singing is all about, well, nothing can ever be the same. My point is that it may only be in hindsight that the mind, newly alive and fully awake, can come face-to-face with itself or that a person can come to properly read their own history.

So while it is only fair to take these people's stories at face value, such as they are, to receive them as a tentative exchange of friendship and to honor their honest questions, we should not imagine that we have fully penetrated their diverse experiences. They are not two-dimensional cardboard cutouts, after all. There is so very much more to them than that. And they compel us to admit how much more difficult it is to answer, not questions—"Isn't the church full of hypocrites?"—but actual living and breathing people, living their particular lives, who do more than blandly nod their heads.

No, this is not a comfortable book.

You may even sense some risk in this project, risk in publishing and spreading the influence of anti-biblical viewpoints.

*If so, please consider some recent research into the experience of Christian college students at the secular university. One study reveals that it goes too far to say that the barrage of intellectual challenges, the very air you breathe at such places, is somehow able to destroy the faith of any young person who dares to enter. It is more accurate to say that the university environment merely **exposes what is superficial** about the faith of Christian students, the questions that never once occurred to them, the hard work they have not done in making sound theology their own, and what are the untested skin-deep places of their Christian understanding. The university merely exposes the vulnerability of young believers who were already, long before they left home, at least partially disconnecting from the life of faith and from the community of worshipers gathered around the means of grace. Above all, the jarring experience in the philosophy classroom or the coed dorm will expose those tentative disciples who have no mature Christian mentor in their own back pocket, no one to receive their text message, "I'm so confused," no one who will run and pull them to their chest.*

I'm thinking of my own daughter. She received a top-shelf education at a highly respected university. I saw the look on the face of one of her mentors as she presented a senior seminar in the psychology department; he beamed at her with at least as much pride as I did. Her world opened up in college, and some wonderful people stepped inside. All in all, it was a very impressive and stimulating place. Only that's not the whole story. Bear with me, because I need to take you there, if I can.

The "Christian bubble" burst for her, so to speak, and it happened on the first day. What one Christian philosopher terms "naive faith" is no longer possible for her and never will be again. That is to say, she can no longer believe in God in the taken-for-grantedness of "Well,

what **else** would I believe?" She is no longer unable to imagine the alternative to trusting in Jesus or what it could possibly look like to navigate the world in any other way. Because there she sits in the midst of that colorful, smiling diversity, finding out that she represents only one among dozens of **apparently** viable options. This was her first five minutes.

My daughter is not told but intuits at once what mumbling, "The Bible says . . ." would sound like there. The Christian life—the life lived in and with, by, and for Jesus and, along with it, the gray-haired church down the street—can be dismissed out of hand. Ask the person on the street what the word **evangelical** means to them or what the Bible is all about. First, you might want to brace yourself.

Intolerance. Bigotry. Hatred.

And in an intellectual climate in which Jesus has come to strike many ears like some sort of fairy tale or the weird legend of a remote culture, why in the world would they give him a second thought? What we have here is a quite appalling failure to communicate. More than that, it is the grotesque agenda of Satan at work, the terrible obscuring of the very glory of God that has come to us in the form which we could bear, that is, the face of Christ.

My daughter tries to tell me what it felt like to go to college, how it dawned on her in the first class she attended, in her words, "None of my Christian teachers have ever sat where I sit right now. Not even my dad." The characterization of evolutionists she had picked up somewhere along the way turned out to be a fiction. These are **not** stupid people. Certain rational arguments for a biblical view of the world, the ones that were supposed to send scientists running, plainly did not. They were batted away like flies. As to the actual vulnerabilities in the reasoned arguments that say this world we can see is all there is, she would have to discover them on her own (for just one example, the mystery of consciousness). And while the "sage on the stage" in the college classroom reached for her mind, what is even more formative about the college life—think dormitories and Friday nights and cliques of people anyone would want to break into—would reach for her love, her desire, her imagining of who else she could be, and what else there might be to want out of life.

Of course there are other Christians there, but they will have to find one another. That is precisely what she did. Simply put, that is how she survived. She went to church. It seems like such a small thing to say it that way. But there it is.

She went to church.

She started a fledgling campus ministry of four or five peers. They met in a quintessential 1970s-style church basement. The worship style there was liturgical, the kind performed in a transcendent style—in mystery, beauty, symbol; in confession and absolution; in the high and holy pleasure that God finds in saying to his children, again, “I forgive you. I am for you. I Am.” We drag our poor halfheartedness to the sanctuary (or the sanctuary basement), to kneel and pray, to sing and genuflect our worldview, to lay our old arguments and questions at the foot of the dear cross. A heart-pounding glory stretches out before us, our future having been conquered as well as our past. It is pure joy, his joy, and it does not end.

Yes, my daughter survived with a faith made much more her own, burning brightly. And yet, for my part, did I even begin to comprehend what I was letting her in for as I drove away from her dorm that first late-summer day? Not in a million years. If her experience is unfamiliar to you and you’ve never sat in that desk either, this could be the whole value of Quick to Listen, precisely when it creates the most discomfort. Surely, we need to know something about such things or at least have some inkling about what it feels like to be there.

Surely, we cannot be content with tired and dated straw man arguments, continuing to pitch our favorite battles while the real war rages elsewhere. Surely, we do not want to display a sort of religion that is secure only because we have managed to close our eyes and stop our ears, preferring the Christian “echo chamber.” The journey is worth it. It is so that we who hope to be able to call ourselves mature followers of Jesus can say to the vulnerable among us, “This world will eat you alive! Dear ones, it will eat you alive if you do not stay connected to the Word of God and the family of faith!” To do so with convincing and helpful urgency, we need to know what we’re talking about.

If this is you—vulnerable, already all too familiar with the slippery case against Christ, perhaps losing your grip on him, sensing a creeping skepticism in yourself as you pick up your Bible or leave it alone; if your Jesus doesn’t seem quite as real anymore compared to the shimmering, flattering world; if you are out there somewhere working things out all on your own—this may not be the book for you. Read your New Testament instead and immerse in its narratives and letters, like coming home. Throw open again a window on your life. Read a psalm out loud on your walk. Set your Sunday morning alarm. Invest

in a uniquely Christian friendship and find a good coffee shop or take over a corner booth. See to your own soul.

Then again, this may yet be a book to bless you profoundly.

*Because, don't get me wrong, although the purpose of this book is unique in keeping with its title and our guest skeptics are given something like equal time, our writers do have answers, quite good ones in fact. The answers they offer may, in fact, be precisely what the tentative believer most requires. They are grace-saturated and Christ-obsessed, wrapped in the warmth of human skin and informed by long experience, and they come from educated people who do their best to be winsome and thoughtful. Let the defense we provide at the "sites of struggle," those meeting places where Christian truth is contested, be free of the "gotcha" or any hint of weaponized rhetoric. To speak about the grace of God with a hostile or superior tone is to contradict ourselves. We want **what** we say—in our myopic focus on Jesus, in this spotlight fixed on a cross—to be in harmony with **how** we say it and, in fact, an expression and extension of who we are becoming by grace so that, come what may, **they know that we love them.***

You should know, however, that this book does not take pains to answer the skeptic point-for-point. In fact, the interviewers you are about to meet are kind enough to let their interviewees get away with a few things. They don't pounce when one of their questions is met with something quite flimsy. They do not interrupt to say "you're wrong" every chance they can, just because they can.

*The Christian players in this book model a rare and gracious style of interaction designed to "change the moment." This seems necessary given how predictable in this time and place are the patterns of resistance to anyone transparently Christian. They mean to keep down the psychological guard of the other person, if they can. They go to identify and to share in human stuff, the hunger for relationship and the striving for significance. They are not immune to all possible influence—who wants to talk to people like that?—but come expecting to gain a more complex view of all that still divides, prepared to be thankful for the education. They bring with them their openness, not to error—God forbid—but an openness to people, being profoundly interested in how they have come to think and live as they do. They ache for a communication moment in which, as someone has put it, "a person becomes a person before their very eyes." That is to say, not a label. Not a stereotype. A human being. A soul. A **somebody** whom Jesus loves.*

Ah, to just stand side by side at the Lord's table and be two sinners with our hands held out.

*The listening that is modeled here includes taking care not to dismiss the unrelenting pain or contradict the deep disappointment that animates at least some of the resistance they meet. Our writers do not casually excuse the dismal ways in which the church has failed these people when they hungered for a word of grace and belonging and none came. Instead, their better impulse is to question their own self-righteousness and the way they have not represented Jesus in their lives. Further, their impulse is to reach for the heart of the other, to forge a human connection, even by means of connecting with what is most painful in themselves, if that's what it takes—"I too have lost a child, though I too prayed and prayed." They meet those stray moments within these interviews, instances of bitterness or dogmatism, with something **else**, namely, gentleness and respect. They would have stereotypes explode on **both** sides.*

These conversations are instructive. Please notice how this posture of grace—of self-questioning and of genuinely wanting to understand—allows slim plots of common ground to appear. Listen for those uncommon admissions by the participants in this project about what they envy or admire in people of faith, what they miss, what they honestly don't know, and how they too have been wrong. We can grow those hopeful spaces. "Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Maybe I don't believe in him either," or, "Tell me about the religion you've left behind. I might just breathe a sigh and say, 'Well, thank God you did.'" We might just surprise them.

There is a reason, if only temporarily, to take on a posture with people whose lives we have not lived—one that says, "You are the teacher. I am the student. Teach me."

I, for one, do very much want to know the psychological barriers that exist between us: the unnecessary offense we cause (as opposed to the necessary scandal of the cross) and the outward reasons—intellectual, social, and personal—that these people are hanging onto. I want to know the stories they tell themselves, such as they are. I want to know them simply because the way they feel about Christianity makes its own kind of sense within the way they have come to tell their story. If it had been incomprehensible before—their disillusionment, their sense of betrayal, or whatever the case may be—it will not be any more.

I want and need to know what the "defeaters" are for these people—that's the term a prominent Christian has coined. He has in mind a set

of ideas that have come to feel self-evidently true to non-Christians and which, if they are true, then Christianity cannot be. An example would be, “It is wrong to claim that your beliefs are superior to those of other people.” Like all such ideas, this one could stand to be examined and gently deconstructed.

I want to know the things these people aspire to—identity, meaning, freedom, connection—which I can passionately affirm even as I disagree about where they think such things are found. I want to know what it is that they cannot live without—whatever would tell them at last that they are someone in this world—so that, as a kindness, I can gently probe whether they understand how each falsehood ultimately will break their hearts. I want to know these things in order to strike at the root of their idolatries, and mine at the same time, using the living and active Word of God.

*I want to clear the stage for the brilliant sentence of the apostle, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). If you live for anything else in this world, then you will die a thousand deaths as the years strip that thing away. It will happen in bits and pieces, if not in one terrible, inevitable swath. “For to me, to live **is Christ**”—this and only this will mean that “to die is **gain**,” with the blessed day already on its way to bring you completely and at last into that which you called your real life all along. It is brilliant.*

*All this is to answer the call to be “imitators of Christ” as people who are dearly loved. How like Jesus it was that day he turned, in a jostling crowd, to a woman who had touched his clothes and was healed. It is at that moment that we are treated to the exquisite detail that she “told him **the whole truth**” (Mark 5:33). We can only try to mentally construct the scene: the sort of attention he paid her, the manner, the look on God’s face saying, “Go on.” The all-knowing One found a reason to hear her, to—I don’t know—just let her talk. Certainly there must remain some very good reasons for us, the not-so-omniscient, to want to hear people. I want to be able to explain their point of view to them, their “whole truth,” if I can, better than they can explain it themselves. I want to give words to how it all looks and how it all feels to hear someone exclaim now and then, “Yes, that’s it exactly!” and maybe even, “Thank you!”*

Why? So that by understanding, I can be understood. So that I can speak words that are not superficial, words that stick, into another mind and heart. So that I can tell that better, grander, and more dramatic God-so-loved-the-world story, the one that is absolutely true,

told faithfully in the Bible, guaranteed by the Spirit himself. The One Grand Miracle of Christ's incarnation. The Big Fact of Easter. By grace, these resonate. To become caught up in that story is not anti-reason but reasoning of a higher kind, as the mind soars to Christ, for whom I am willing to be a fool. What makes sense within **that** story, as we tell it to one another, is all peace, all hope, all joy.

We are talking about spiritual friendship, an esthetic achievement . . . and humility is the price of admission. I do not wish to win arguments, but only to arrive at the moment when I get the chance to leave a new friend alone with a Word of Christ, leaving it to the two of them to work it all out. (Meanwhile, I will speak to Christ about the other person at least as much as I have spoken to the person about Christ.)

Just imagine the redeemed version of all these fascinating interview subjects, when the Spirit does with them what only he can do by the Word of God to which he has married himself. Imagine what fresh air they will bring with them into our circle, what sanctified insight and what heartening encouragements they will uniquely have to offer in our Upper Room, when they've learned to tell their story in a new way. We do not want to miss out on them. If it will get us **there**, then yes, I'm willing to learn.

This book goes out in search of its ideal reader. It will find that in all of you who are like-minded in Christ and, likewise, are not content with a shallow understanding of all those many people who live without him. Jesus did not sit in some basement to write a blog about what's wrong with the world. God came in the flesh, drawn by our misery all the way down and all the way into our human existence to wade out into that sea of ignorance and suffering, to give himself outright to a world all lined up together in its hostility toward him. God in hell. God himself in the sort of pain no one else can possibly know, and it was all for you. Imagine. It is by this unfathomable grace that he has made you, his natural-born enemy, into his friend. There is no basis for self-righteousness and no need to isolate ourselves. Secure in the knowledge of him, you are now hungry to be drawn fully into the real world, to learn there what it means to be thrown onto Christ and to rely on his Word, as all you really have, in the places where faith and unbelief collide.

Knowing what you know, you are able to tolerate some ambiguity, that gap in time between the hard question and the hard-won, costly answer. You've been at this a while, so you've been in that place before, and no matter the dilemma, time and time again you have come out the other side to the warm reality of Jesus: the release of forgiveness,

*the gift of an identity that does not crush you because you did nothing to earn or deserve it, the resilience of hope and joy, and the Spirit that does not give you up without a fight. You are kept by the power of God. It is **he** who is holding **you**.*

And so you are hungry to model in all your talk of faith a serene, Spirit-worked confidence in Jesus, in whom God, your “God who hides himself,” has revealed his very heart. No, you don’t have him all figured out. His very thought transcends our own like the heavens spin impossibly high above the earth. But you trust him, asking that his will, not yours, be done. You trust him because he has won that much from you. You trust him, so much so that it renders all defensiveness plainly unnecessary. There is no need for panic if, for a time, you have no clue what you can say. It’s going to be alright.

Grace has awakened this feeling in your bones that we who know Christ need to know who these people are as well, to let our hearts be broken, and to love them as well as we can. But how? The apostle James lights up for us a very good place to begin: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak” (James 1:19).

—Mark Paustian,
Professor at Martin Luther College,
New Ulm, Minnesota—July 2017

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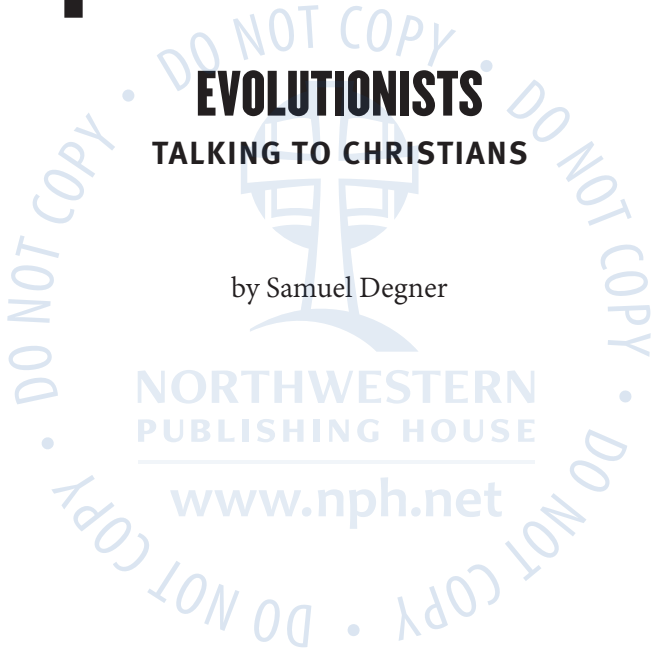
quick to listen

EVOLUTIONISTS TALKING TO CHRISTIANS

by Samuel Degner

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LISTENING TO GREG

This isn't a topic I've had to really wrestle with too much. I'll just start with my faith background. I'm Eastern Orthodox. The Eastern Orthodox Church doesn't really have concrete views on this issue; there aren't any dogmas associated with it. So in thinking about creation and Genesis and evolution, or any question you could ever pose, the starting point is always the cross and the crucifixion and the resurrection. Everything in the Old Testament is interpreted through that lens of the cross, and everything in the New Testament as well. But also everything in human history, creation history—everything is through that lens. And so I guess I might come back to that with my answers. But I would say the overall general view of the Orthodox Church is the idea of not feeling obliged to partake in the wrestling match of trying to reconcile everything—always leaving as much room for mystery as possible and, at the same time, acknowledging that science is in our toolbox to arrive at truths about the world that we live in. And that those truths don't have to detract from who God is and what he's done through his Son for the salvation of the world. So that's a starting point, I guess. I haven't done extensive research into patristic literature on the subject, but from some of the secondary sources I've read, it seems like historically, in the early church, there were various opinions from a lot of the Eastern fathers and some of the Western fathers too. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Theologian, Basil the Great, and a lot of these early fathers didn't adhere to a literal interpretation of Genesis and the creation narrative as depicted in Genesis. So there was a lot of room for interpretation with that.

Why do you think they didn't?

I don't think they had to. Perhaps just due to where the scientific community was at that time, there wasn't a pressure to have to. I don't think trying to justify a creation story in scientifically accurate terms is necessary to understand the heart of the gospel message. And I think that's what the main concern was and still is.

Do you think our understanding of the cross and resurrection is affected by how we view the origins of the earth?

That's a good question. I don't think it needs to be. One of the lines [of the Bible] that pops out for me is from Revelation, where it talks about the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world. That's kind of a mysterious line to think about. But I think the important thing is understanding the role of God in creation. And the second person of the Trinity being Jesus Christ (who from the gospels it's clear that he is pre-eternal, together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, in one essence) orchestrated creation in some way, and I don't think scientists have a great explanation of how all this happened. So for me, however all this came to be, there is a real mystery to it and there is a real beauty to both the complexity and simplicity of our world. Going back to the cross, I think Christ died to redeem humanity but also all of creation. And exactly what that "new earth" is going to look like, I don't really know. For me, though, those origins don't really detract from the cross.

It sounds like the origins don't really matter and you're okay with having some mystery and some unknowns. Would you say you have a leaning, or predisposition, to believe one thing or another?

I'd say I lean more toward the evolution side. I'm definitely not an expert in that. For example, I still need to read *The Origin of Species*, and there's a lot of stuff I want to further explore to better understand that. In terms of the world I see and the evidence, I think the alternative would be that God made the world to look old. There's some deception there, some things that, for me, are less plausible.

So you're saying that the "God created the world to appear old" theory doesn't really resonate with you?

LISTENING TO RICHARD

Doubting Thomas Had It Easy

It will be easier for me to discuss my thoughts and feelings about the Bible after I describe my long road from believer to nonbeliever, so I ask for your indulgence.

I had the good fortune to be born right into the correct religion, or so I believed—just like millions of other kids in countless other religions. I was certain that my particular god and holy book were true and that all other gods and holy books were Satan's clever deceptions.

My first brush with doubt came when I was six. I came down with the flu, so my mother stayed with me Sunday morning while my dad went to church. I asked my mom why God would let me get so sick if he was all-powerful and all-loving. (I probably didn't use exactly those words.) My normally patient, kind, and loving mother got angry and told me it was wrong to ask such questions. And that was that. She had effectively nipped in the bud any armchair philosophizing I was going to do for about ten more years.

As I got older, I slowly realized that certainty comes easy but proper doubt takes hard, honest work.

At 17, after a decade of keeping my doubts chained to the floor in the basement of my mind, I realized something: If God is all-knowing, then he knows the future. If he knows the future, then he knows that I would have my doubts and eventually lose my faith, leading me to eternal damnation. Now, if he knew that I was going to end up in hell for eternity, then why would he let me be born in the first place? Not bad for a teenager who had never heard of Spinoza, Hume, Russell, Paine, or Dawkins. Still, it wasn't enough to make me *seriously* doubt my faith. Too much was at stake, and I wasn't about to fritter away eternal life (and perhaps even the love of my own family!) just

on a silly little hunch. But, like a faintly flashing firefly in a dark field, the thought persisted, off and on.

It wasn't until university that my doubt began to properly crystallize. I was studying engineering, which allowed for only one elective in first year. I took a course called Problems in Philosophy. It was there that I read Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not A Christian" and realized that I wasn't alone. There was at least one other person on earth who had doubts, and he was able to state them clearly and reasonably. That was as close to a eureka moment as I ever got. It did not cause an instant deconversion, but it was the single biggest step in that direction. A few years later I read Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker* and learned that over a century earlier Charles Darwin pulled the rug out from under the argument from design for God's existence. I had no idea!

That's the shortest version of the story of how a Canadian lower-middle-class boy went from devout Christian to devout none-of-the-abover. My sense of morality remained intact—arguably it was now on a firmer foundation—but my willingness to sweep hard questions under a supernatural rug had gone. I wasn't afraid to ask hard questions, and I wasn't going to be bullied by threats of an unsavory afterlife.

The most interesting thing to come out of all this is my acceptance of the thought that *I could be wrong*. I am comfortable with this possibility. I don't deny it. *I could be wrong*. It is possible that I've not considered some important piece of evidence, or I've misunderstood something, or I've not heard a certain persuasive argument. Maybe Saint Anselm's ontological argument is flawless and I am just too blind to see it. It could be that the Gospel is inerrant and I've just been misled by some arrogant jerks.

All of this is possible, but after a couple of decades of thinking about it, I have concluded that it is very unlikely. Yes, I could be wrong about Jesus' existence and divinity, just like I could be wrong about the hundreds (if not thousands) of other gods who have been the objects of sincere devotion over the millennia. I've heard it said that atheists and Christians disbelieve in *almost exactly* the same number of gods. If you're not losing any sleep over your doubts about Osiris, then you know exactly how I feel!

My religious belief was never predicated on the careful weighing of all the bits and pieces of the Bible, so its dismantling did not require refutation of every verse in every chapter. My position today is that the Bible is a diverse collection of books written by diverse and anonymous authors across several centuries. Some of it is historical, some is not; some of it is wise and timeless, some of it is cruel and barbaric. Some of it can be inspiring, but some of it is embarrassing to all but the most faith-imbued mind.

In short, it is a kind of Rorschach inkblot test. It can appear to be whatever the beholder wants it to be. If you want to own slaves, the Bible can support you; if you want to emancipate slaves, the Bible can support you; if you want to persecute homosexuals, the Bible can support you; if you want to fight for gay equality, the Bible can support you. Are you looking for guidance regarding abortion? gun control? women's rights? democracy? how to deal with a witch? Whatever your position on whatever topic, the Bible can support you. That could be one of the secrets of its success, if numbers of copies is a measure of success.

As a former Christian, I know that Christians place a great emphasis on the good news of the New Testament. If you had to boil the whole thing down to one verse, then John 3:16 usually does the trick, or at least this was the case in what was my denomination of Christianity.

I can still recite that verse from heart: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

How did I do? I'm probably off by a word or two, but that is exactly what I was able to remember (without any help from Google) after over 30 years of dormancy. I guess that means it was probably the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible that I used to study.

I've learned since then that the King James Version of the Bible was translated and updated from earlier texts by some of the greatest English writers of the day, possibly even Shakespeare himself was among them. So the beauty and poetry of the KJV is no mere coincidence. By that same token, we can infer that pre-KJV Bibles did not have quite the same oomph, which might make one wonder: How many layers and how many languages have the books of the Bible

gone through to get to us in their current form? What forces shaped each iteration? At what point was God involved?

It seems to me to be too much of a coincidence that the God of the Bible so much resembled the people He was speaking to. These people knew nothing about atoms, viruses, quasars, electricity, etc., and so neither did their god. These people were concerned about livestock, adultery, property, wars, and filial responsibility, and therefore, so was their god. This is either an odd coincidence, or it is exactly what it looks like: the Bible is a book written by humans, with the same brilliances and shortcomings that humans have—much like the Book of Mormon, the Koran, and any other holy book that has ever been written.

I could be wrong.



The sisters sit in silence. They've just been talking about the past, about their childhood. About the darkest parts of their childhood. About how a father could treat his daughters the way he did, and how a mother could sit idly by and do nothing. Worst part of all, both agreed, was that their family was so well known in the community as exemplary Christians. And these "exemplary" Christian parents taught their kids Scripture, especially the parts about God creating Adam in charge and Eve as a silent helper, about Paul commanding women to be silent and submissive, about women that ought to do their duty.

After the two sisters had moved out of their parents' house, each took off in an opposite trajectory.

One hated her parents, hated God, and hated religion. Most of all, she hated the Bible. At the end of the day, the Bible was used to justify all these dark things from her past. And it was used not only to justify what she had suffered but the sufferings of millions of women throughout history. As she went through university, she found out so much more about the so-called Word of God. This Bible is old! The newest parts were written 2,000 years ago and then copied by hand for 1,500 years. That's 1,500 years for thousands of copyist errors, 1,500 years for misogynist men to slip in their own words, 1,500 years for pure myth to turn into something people today actually take seriously. She hates the Bible. In it she finds nothing but foolishness and despair.

Her sister couldn't have felt more different. During university, she began spending time with Christians who actually read the whole Bible, using clear passages to make sense of the unclear ones. And these Christians loved history and manuscripts, showing her that the Bible had an unparalleled number of manuscripts for scholars to study, and so an unparalleled integrity compared to every other ancient book. But most of all, they showed her a Jesus who began to bring light to her dark past, a Jesus who began to heal wounds to her self-identity that she never thought would be healed. She found a Jesus who loved her, died for her, and now cares for her. She found a Jesus who condemned men for treating her like an object or toy or lesser person. She found a Jesus who championed her and called for the men in her life to champion her. She loves the Bible. In it she finds nothing but joy and hope.

How can two people see the Bible so differently, feel so differently about it, and find such opposite things within it? But more important, what can they do about the silence? How can they begin talking about this book that has so polarized them from each other? And most

important, who knows the real Jesus best, and how can she start to share him so that the healing might begin anew?

“I can’t trust what’s survived from old books.”

We don’t have the originals of the New Testament. What we have are thousands of copies of the New Testament that were made in most cases centuries later. We don’t have the originals. We have copies made centuries later. These copies that were made centuries later contain numerous mistakes. Thousands of mistakes. Tens of thousands of mistakes. Hundreds of thousands of mistakes . . . At some point I came to the realization that my belief in the inerrancy of the autographs did not make sense. If God inspired the Bible without error, why hadn’t he preserved the Bible without error?

—Bart Ehrman,
New Testament scholar

Are old books, like the Bible, trustworthy enough to build religions on? Bart Ehrman suggests no, and Ehrman is no slouch. He was at the top of his class while studying at Princeton under Bruce Metzger, one of the world’s most influential New Testament scholars (and a Christian). He has written over 30 books, including college and seminary textbooks on the history of the New Testament. Almost single-handedly, he made reading about the historicity of the New Testament in vogue, writing five New York Times Best-sellers on the life of Jesus, most recently How Jesus Became God. Again, he’s no slouch. He’s done his homework. He’s put in his time. In fact, I once heard Bart Ehrman speaking at a professional conference of biblical scholars, and he said to the room of scholars, “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” for not having a better handle on their Greek! And now this recognized leader in the field of textual criticism (the study of differences between the handwritten copies of ancient documents, especially the Bible) tells us these surviving manuscript copies of the Bible contain hundreds of thousands of mistakes (often referred to as “variants”). And he’s right. God did not preserve the Bible without copying errors. And this has led to a general impression that the Bible is so old, there’s no way today’s translations reflect the original documents, since the Bible has

evolved so much throughout history. Consider comedians Bill Hicks and David Cross:

They believe the Bible is the exact word of God. Then they change the Bible! Pretty presumptuous, huh? “I think what God meant to say . . .”

—Bill Hicks

Back when the Bible was written, then edited, then rewritten, then rewritten, then re-edited, then translated from dead languages, then re-translated, then edited, then rewritten, then given to kings for them to take their favorite parts, then re-written, then translated again, then given to the pope for him to approve, then rewritten, then edited again, then re-re-re-re-re-re-re-written again . . . all based on stories that were told orally 30 to 90 years after they happened . . . to people who didn't know how to write . . . SO, I guess what I'm saying is, the Bible is literally the world's oldest game of Telephone.

—David Cross

Here's another layer of the discussion: Besides all the differences between surviving manuscript copies, there is a gap of time between when the original documents were written and our earliest copies, and we don't know entirely what was happening to the document in that gap of time. For example, Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians sometime around A.D. 48. That letter was then copied, the copies were circulated around the Mediterranean, and those copies were copied, and so forth. Over time, the original letter Paul wrote disintegrated and passed into oblivion, but some of the copies still exist. One of the earliest copies of that letter we have dates from 175 to 225 (Papyrus 46). This means between 120 and 180 years passed between when Paul wrote Galatians and our earliest copy of that letter. We don't have the original letter, and we don't have any copies that were made in that 120–180 year gap. This is all meant to stress the point: We don't have Paul's original letter to the Galatians, and we don't have any copies of that letter for at least 120 years. What we do have are copies after 120 years have passed, and they don't all agree 100 percent on what Paul wrote.

When we combine these two facts, that, on the one hand, there are hundreds of thousands of variants among our New Testament manuscripts and that, on the other hand, there is a gap of around 100–200

years between our earliest surviving manuscripts and the original letters, we might be tempted to speak like Bishop John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal theologian who, because of the perceived unreliability of the Scriptures coupled with a belief in evolution, gave up entirely on defining his faith in Trinitarian or orthodox Christological terms.

The question must also be raised as to whether we have the actual words of Jesus in any Gospel.

—Bishop John Shelby Spong

Given what top scholars like Ehrman are writing, we can begin to understand why Spong might reach his conclusions. The reality of a vast amount of variants and the gap between the documents we have and the originals is fact, and so it's taught in university classrooms around the world. In fact, all of the pastors in my own church body study these facts in seminary, and every week we use critical editions of the Greek New Testament when we prepare our sermons, and in those critical editions we can compare the differences between some of these manuscripts. What Ehrman said above is technically correct, and so he asks a very legitimate question: Nothing is more important to the Christian than a reliable Bible, because to be a Christian is to take what the Bible says about Jesus Christ and believe that it is, in fact, historically and objectively true. But if the historical integrity of the manuscripts can't be trusted (if we can't know for sure if what we're reading is what the original authors wrote), how can we be certain that what we teach is true?

*A Christian's immediate response to Ehrman or someone who has just read one of his books might be something along the lines of "You've just gotta have faith." In other words, we'll let the textual critics do whatever they want and have whatever conversations they want, but that's a sphere of life that I'm going to avoid and not address, and I'm going to live my Christian life as if Ehrman's research and conclusions don't exist. But we need to realize that if that's the only response we give to our skeptical friends, it may simply reinforce their skepticism. After all, if we believe that the Bible we have is, in fact, what was written by the original authors, shouldn't we be aware of at least **some** evidence that would back that up? Shouldn't a love that rejoices in the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6) have at least a little bit more to say about the truth?*

The truth is, there is plenty of evidence that the Bible remains reliable. Here are a few things worth researching so that you can have a respectful yet productive conversation.

First off, determining how reliable a manuscript might be is an issue not only for the New Testament but for every other ancient document that we have. Before the printing press, all ancient documents were hand-copied and so have scribal variants (differences in words or spelling between copies) that historians must consider when determining what the original manuscripts of any ancient document might have been. The more manuscript copies historians find, the better the historians can reconstruct the family trees of copied manuscripts, and so the more confidence historians have of their ability to reconstruct the precise wording of the original texts.

Most famous works of antiquity have very few surviving manuscripts. And very few of these surviving manuscripts are early copies. For example, at the end of the first century A.D., the Roman historian Tacitus wrote the Annals, one of our most important histories of ancient Rome. Of the Annals' 16 books, we have one manuscript from A.D. 850 of books 1–6, books 7–10 are entirely lost; and 30 manuscript copies of books 11–16 were all copied from one manuscript from A.D. 1050.

*In contrast, one of the reasons we have so many variant readings of the New Testament is because we have so **many** ancient copies of God's Word. God has preserved over five thousand manuscript copies of the New Testament in ancient Greek alone (and many more if we include translations). This is a staggering amount. Many of these copies are fragmentary with only parts of the original document surviving, but many are complete copies of entire books or collections of books. Manuscript fragments survive that have been dated from as early as A.D. 117, possibly only 20 years after those specific books of the Bible were written. We have complete copies of the entire New Testament in one manuscript collection from the early 300s, only two hundred years after the New Testament was completed. This means the New Testament has considerably more and earlier copies of manuscripts than any other work of antiquity. In fact, no other ancient document comes close.*

And there are certainly hundreds of thousands of variants between the more than five thousand Greek manuscripts we have. But if we subtract the variants that are repeated in two or more manuscripts (in other words, if we are counting only unique variants), then the number is reduced to around ten thousand variants. Most of these ten thousand variants are simply differences in spelling or word order. This leaves

only a very small number where the original is debated (compared to the 138,000 words in the New Testament). And not one variant changes a single Bible teaching. We can be certain that the original message of the authors of the New Testament is preserved. No other book from Western antiquity comes near the amount of manuscript evidence that has been preserved, and so we can be confident that we are reading the New Testament as it has been written.

Most Bible scholars do not talk about the biblical text in the same foreboding tone of voice of Ehrman. For example, Craig Blomberg, a Bible scholar and one of the editors of the world's best-selling English translation of the Bible, the New International Version (NIV), writes,

The vast majority of textual variants are wholly uninteresting except to specialists. . . . Less than 3 percent of them are significant enough to be presented in one of the two standard critical editions of the Greek New Testament. Only about a tenth of 1 percent of them are interesting enough to make their way into footnotes in most English translations. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that no orthodox doctrine or ethical practice of Christianity depends solely on any disputed wording. There are always undisputed passages one can consult that teach the same truths.

—Craig Blomberg,
Can We Still Believe the Bible?

And so, interestingly, the more you join in with Ehrman and take a look at the manuscript history of the New Testament, the more blown away you'll be with how exceptional and unique our Bible is compared to any other book. God promised that he would preserve the gospel for us and that the Bible would remain trustworthy and dependable. Jesus himself even says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mark 13:31). And this is ultimately why we believe the Bible is reliable: God tells us it is. We don't need professional Bible scholars to prove this for us. Yet knowing how God has preserved it can be extremely useful for Christians. Despite God using imperfect humans that can make mistakes when they copy the Bible, the clear message of Jesus stands unshaken for two thousand years now. Being able to demonstrate that Jesus' words have indeed not passed away gives Christians the ability to have conversations they might not otherwise have, to address criticisms raised within the historical community, and to reject and replace caricatures of how the Bible has come to