

"Takes you beyond easy answers to timely truth."

Kathy Koch, PhD

Speaker and author, *Screens and Teens*

Unquestioned Answers



*Rethinking Ten Christian Clichés
to Rediscover Biblical Truths*

Jeff **Myers**

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Introduction

Unanswered Questions, Unquestioned Answers



Every head turned to watch as I made my way down the aisle and dropped into my seat, red faced.

My fourth-grade teacher, Miss Wright, with her bobbed hairdo and perma-tan from years spent as a missionary in Hawaii, fixed her gaze on me, waiting for an explanation.

“Sorry I’m late,” I stammered. “Our car wouldn’t start.”

This was my regular excuse. Our bright orange and pastel white Volkswagen van never started when we needed it to. Like so many other things in those hippie times of the sixties and seventies, the van was cool, charming, and utterly unreliable.

Being late that day reinforced the misery I was already feeling in my first year at a new school. My parents had transferred me to

the strict Christian institution when they discovered I wasn't learning anything at my old school in our blue-collar Detroit suburb. I can understand why they moved me. My best friend, Phillip, and I had perfected the art of pilfering our frazzled teacher's answer book as she wandered the room, trying to keep thirty-five rowdy and unmotivated students under control. Getting good grades was easy if you could copy all the answers before getting caught.

But now, in my new Christian school, I was flailing and feeling very out of place.

Glancing around, I noticed a pretty girl, Shelly, mirroring Miss Wright's disapproving glare. My feelings about Shelly were mixed. I couldn't deny she was cute, but I hated when she was chosen to be the classroom monitor—as she always was.

You never caught a break with Shelly. Earlier in the year, I had accidentally tripped her when we left our seats simultaneously to approach the teacher's desk.

“He tripped me!” she fumed. “On *purpose!*”

It wasn't true, but it was hard to stop grinning even as I issued my denials.

Now here I was being scorned again. *Well*, I thought, *there are worse things than being late*. I slipped off my coat and pulled out my math book without looking up at Miss Wright.

Finally, she broke the silence. “Okay, class, get back to your lesson, and I'll come around to collect your homework.”

Relieved, I rustled through my briefcase, a little red-and-black plastic satchel my grandfather had given me. I retrieved my homework just as Miss Wright arrived at my desk.

I handed the wrinkled papers to her, knowing exactly what would happen next. Miss Wright would ask the boy next to me, Brian, “Do you have your homework for me?”

Brian would shake his head.

“All right, then. Go to Mrs. Greeley’s office,” Miss Wright would say.

It happened nearly every day. Brian would push up his glasses on his nose and shuffle toward the door. Some of the girls probably felt sorry for him. The boys were unsettled that he was targeted for daily humiliation. But none of us wanted to be the next Brian. We stared at our books and pretended not to hear the exchange.

Those who had visited the principal’s office knew that every problem had the same solution. Proverbs 13:24, King James Version, might have been our school motto: “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.” Mrs. Greeley interpreted this verse literally. A few swats of a paddle seemed to fix most kids’ problems. Just the threat of it kept most of us in line.

After a few minutes the door reopened. Brian shuffled back in and quietly resumed his seat. I glanced over. Tears of resignation rimmed his eyes as he stared blankly ahead. Brian was accustomed to this routine by now, stoically receiving his daily punishment and doing his best to not let anyone see his hurt.

Maybe it was my own frustration at having been late to school for the umpteenth time, but I burned with indignation at Brian’s fate. *Has it ever occurred to anyone that a kid who never turns in his homework might have a problem that paddling won’t solve?* I wondered.

Suddenly the pattern became clear to my nine-year-old mind. One on one, my teacher and principal were nice. Even Shelly was nice occasionally. Yet the school and its sponsoring church seemed trapped in a rigid system enforced by thunderous pulpit pronouncements: *It's Jesus versus the world. The world wants to drag you into sin. If you doubt, it's because you have a sin problem. If you question what I'm saying, take it up with God* (well-worn Bible held high for emphasis).

Desperate to fit in, I adapted to my situation. I focused more on looking good than doing good. I began to think judgmentally about those who struggled spiritually or academically. I felt pride that I was rarely caught when I did something bad. I usually thought of myself as a basically nice person, but by the end of the school day, I felt mean and sneaky.

No question, my year in Christian school sharpened me intellectually. Our classroom was never out of control and there were no fights in the halls. Nor were there drug dealers lurking on the street corner as they did at my old school. But I was a sensitive kid—the kind who cried when his balloon popped. I dreaded the sternness. I dreaded the backbiting and posturing.

I dreaded the “us versus them” mentality: we are the good guys; everyone else is a fool who will die and go to you-know-where. Chapel messages ended the same way every time: *Are you sure—absolutely sure—that God will find your name in his book when you get to heaven and that you won't be thrown into the lake of fire?*

To be clear, I know there are things we can be certain of. Good and evil exist, and we ought to know the difference and gain the courage to stand for what is true. Yet when everyone you know is an

“us” and you don’t interact with any “thems,” it’s natural to wonder whether some among “us” might be “thems” in disguise. Infighting results. As humans, if we don’t possess a cause big enough to require unity, we’ll tear one another apart. That kind of quarreling over finer points of doctrine and behavior wore me out.

The next year, our family moved out of state. We ended up in the farmlands of Kansas, where my dad joined his family’s business. Small-town life was a welcome relief. Friendlier. Safer. We attended a small church where we sang the same songs. That was fine with me because I liked singing. We memorized the same Bible verses. That was fine with me because I loved a challenge. We had youth group. That was fine with me because I liked free food.

But something had changed inside me. I couldn’t accept simplistic answers anymore. My doubts about my faith grew, but ironically, so did my judgmental attitude. I judged other believers for thinking they knew the answers. And I judged them for not having answers to my hard questions. Often, I reflected on those people at that small Christian school—Shelly, Brian, Miss Wright, Mrs. Greeley, and all the others. I wondered what they would think about my crisis of faith. Would they admit to having doubts themselves? Finally, I just quit caring. *When I graduate from high school, I thought to myself, I’m going to graduate from church at the same time.*



My childhood crisis of faith led me to feel that Christianity was a simplistic solution in search of a problem simple enough for it to solve. Christians aren’t the only ones who have this issue. Many

people today are consumed with a quasi-religious search for simple solutions. They yearn to find easy order in life's complex chaos. And they feel superior when they discover the "obvious" solution others have missed.

We'll call this way of thinking "Simplicism" (SIM-plier-sihz-um). Simplicity is different from simplicity, which is the virtue of living an uncluttered life. Simplicity distorts simplicity into a conviction that something isn't really true unless it is easy to understand and summarize. Bumper stickers are a good example of Simplicity. If there were an award for the town with the greatest bumper-sticker-per-car ratio, my little town in Colorado would surely be a finalist. Everywhere in Manitou Springs, vehicles are plastered with slogans such as "COEXIST" or "#Resist!" or "The left has never been so right" or "Boycott Israel" or "You can't hug a child with nuclear arms."

Bumper stickers—and their counterparts on social media—make Simplicity seem virtuous: "Look at me! I'm a good and brave person for distilling this complex issue down to its essence and righteously taking a public stand."

I make fun, but in truth I'm easy prey for Simplicity's false offer of salvation. I hate clutter. In moments of stress, I obsessively look for things I can throw in the trash. I even discarded my paycheck once and had to retrieve it from the dumpster. When someone promises to reveal a shortcut that gets me to my destination with minimal effort, I'm all in. When someone tells me that all truth can be summarized in 280 characters, I want to believe that person.

Lately, though, I've come to recognize that my attraction to Simplicity is robbing me of the ability to think logically—and speak clearly—about things that matter.

I'm not just concerned for myself. In one of life's ironies, I now head up Summit Ministries, a respected organization that for more than fifty-seven years has inspired rising generations to reawaken their Christian faith and be leaders who stand strong in a culture of great dishonesty. Operating out of a historic hotel nestled at the foot of Pikes Peak, our instructors offer profound insights about the Bible and the big topics everyone is talking about—abortion, socialism, gender identity, pornography, evolution, social justice, and so forth.

We welcome everyone at Summit, but my heart is especially soft toward young adults who have grown up in the church, as I did, but are questioning their faith, just as I did for a season. And that's a large group—two-thirds of young adults who attended church regularly as teens stop attending; less than one-third of those return.¹

Not only is this a tragedy for the eternal souls of young adults, but it's also a tragedy for our culture. Jesus followers throughout history have transformed the world in science, medicine, human rights, education, the arts, and government. Failing to pass on that heritage puts everything we value as a society at risk.

When I became Summit's president, I carefully studied the characteristics of spiritually at-risk students. My friend David Eaton from Axis helped me find words for the surprising conclusion we reached:

Some people have *unanswered questions*.
Far more struggle with *unquestioned answers*.

Unquestioned answers are the way Simplicism banishes doubt. They're the trite slogans and clichés we devise to simultaneously

avoid deep thinking and shield our opinions from outside criticism. On the surface, unquestioned answers seem to offer confidence. But in the end, they confuse and isolate us. In this book we'll examine some clichés that Christians believe without really thinking about them. This includes slogans such as “Love the sinner; hate the sin” and “Just have faith” and “It's not my place to judge.”

I needed to write this book because I needed to *read* this book. As I wrote, I found myself convicted by the weakness of beliefs I had never taken time to wrestle with. I am full of unanswered questions. But I am also, embarrassingly, full of unquestioned answers. I know I'm not alone. I can't tell you how many people I've journeyed with—especially twentysomethings and thirtysomethings—who lost their footing when a single professor or trusted person called into question a closely held but unexamined belief. Many have yet to recover.

To be fair, we need simple answers for some things. Mental shortcuts help us navigate all the commercial messages, news items, and social media posts bombarding us every day.² Simple sayings can help us remember some valuable life rules. The spelling rule “*i* before *e* except after *c*, unless it sounds like *a*” helps me correctly spell words. It has some exceptions, but only a true grammar geek craves something more thorough.

Yet simplifying things so we can think more clearly is different from developing unquestioned answers that stop us from thinking altogether. The first leads to wisdom. The second leads to, well, Simplicism.

Unquestioned answers are on the rise, unfortunately. They're like addictive drugs. It's hard to stop with one hit. And it's a far more dangerous habit than we realize.

The Dark Side of Unquestioned Answers

When I reflect on the unquestioned answers I have believed, I realize that I often hide behind simplistic slogans because they reinforce my beliefs while making me feel more righteous than those with whom I disagree.

But I've come to realize that unquestioned answers can cause at least three serious problems.

Unquestioned answers make us vulnerable. Reality has a way of challenging our simplistic notions. If we don't have the ability to go deeper, we can quickly spiral into discouragement and despair. If you've experienced a tremendous loss, such as divorce or the death of a child, hearing someone say "Just have faith" doesn't help. And if a friend is struggling with addiction, sitting by and telling yourself "It's not my place to judge" will not give her the help she needs.

Unquestioned answers disillusion us. When our unquestioned answers fail to stand up under scrutiny, we become distrustful of those who gave them to us. This often happens in church. The new generation of adults has the lowest level of church attendance of any generation in American history.³ When churchgoers' surface-level answers fail them, are they prepared to dig deep into the gospel's power? Or has clamoring for easy answers replaced the pursuit of hard truths?

Unquestioned answers produce shame, not change. Unquestioned answers motivate us by making us feel ashamed if we disagree. But this kind of motivation is counterproductive. People who are shamed into agreement usually switch back to their previous opinions once

the pressure is off. As the old saying goes, “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”

At their extreme, unquestioned answers shut down vital discussions and turn others away from the truth. One of my friends developed a PowerPoint presentation with a set of “dueling fish” images to illustrate this point. In the first image, a believer puts a Jesus fish on his car. Then his atheist neighbor responds with a Darwin fish. Then the Christian takes off his Jesus fish and replaces it with a Jesus-fish-eats-Darwin-fish. On and on the slides go, until the audience is laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Here’s my question: What are the odds that the Christian and atheist dueling with their car decals will ever sit down to discuss their perspectives? Not very good. It’s much more likely they’ll become cynical and angry and communicate even less.

Unless we learn to think more clearly and dialogue more openly, our society is in for a rough time. Thoughtfulness is vital for everyone. But as a Christian I feel the need to start in house. Jesus followers ought to lead the way.

In a way, this book is about my own journey of faith. I’ve struggled through many of the clichés we will explore in its pages. When I started writing, I envisioned a quick and easy work that would make me feel clever about what I’ve learned through the years. I wanted to speak as someone capable of responding to every untruth with a clever retort. Instead, I’ve been convicted: I have settled for less than the truth nearly every day of my life. In the following pages, I’ll reveal how. Some of it is embarrassing, but I just don’t know another way to open a thoughtful conversation about misplaced beliefs that keep faith at a shallow

level. I'm looking for robust answers to my questions, and questions that are robust enough to deserve the answers I find.

In that hope, here are ten unquestioned answers I'm concerned are keeping us from hearing God's call to go deep.

Christianity's Top Ten Unquestioned Answers

It's easy to slip into accepting unquestioned answers. As my team and I considered a lengthy list of possibilities, we settled on ten that we've heard repeatedly:

1. "God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me."
2. "Just have faith."
3. "God will heal our land if we humble ourselves and pray."
4. "It's just me and Jesus."
5. "Love the sinner; hate the sin."
6. "Christianity is a relationship, not a religion."
7. "Jesus was a social justice warrior."
8. "It's not my place to judge."
9. "This world has nothing for me."
10. "God is good all the time—all the time God is good."

By wrestling with these clichés, I've sensed a change in my own life. My relationship with God is closer. I'm more inclined to ask questions

and listen thoughtfully to others. I have a better understanding of the Bible, faith, prayer, Christian community, sin, forgiveness, worldview, justice, judgment, the world, and God's goodness. I hope you'll feel the same way as you journey through the pages of this book.

These changes will help us realize that God expects us to think and reflect well. Jesus told his followers to love God with all their hearts, souls, and *minds* (Matt. 22:37). Paul told his readers that “we have the *mind* of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Peter encouraged Christians to give a reasoned case for what they believe (1 Pet. 3:15). Believers are to study hard (2 Tim. 2:15) and seek wisdom and understanding (Prov. 4:5).

Of course, this doesn't mean that only people with high IQs can grasp Jesus's good news. Jesus said that unless we change and become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:2–3). Still, Jesus's words don't justify childishness. We are to be mature in our faith (1 Cor. 14:20) and growing more mature all the time (Heb. 5:14).

God even designed our bodies to think hard and enjoy the pursuit of truth. Brain research shows that thinking intensely and reflecting deeply stimulate the pleasure center of our brains, causing a kind of joy so compelling that it's as if we're touching eternity.⁴

I don't touch eternity often, I'm ashamed to admit. I'm easily distracted. I find thinking painful at times. What I need is to blow the dust off my treasure chest of unquestioned answers, open the creaky lid, and bravely face what's inside. It's the only way I'll ever grow in maturity and speak truth in love to an aimless, angry world.

Recovering Belief from Unquestioned Answers

When as a child I began questioning my faith, I felt a sense of annoyance that others hadn't "seen the light." That feeling didn't last. Gradually—very gradually—I realized that my chosen worldview of unbelief was very narrow. It assumed a lot of things about the world that I knew couldn't be proved. It reduced the world to its parts, but it couldn't make me whole.

Finally, I gained the courage to doubt my doubts. That's when I came back to Jesus and realized he wasn't the one keeping me in bondage. Rather, he was the one who could set me free. Once my heart and mind opened to the fullness of Christ, I craved reality, with its clarity and its mysteries, its beauty and its ugliness, its hopes and its fears, its dreams and its disappointments.

If you're skeptical of this, I understand. Believe me. If we were sitting across from each other over cups of coffee, I would want you to feel safe to express how you see things. I'd want to ask you questions about your journey. If I sensed you were open, I'd want to express how hard it has been for me—even as a convinced believer—to engage the ideas that rule the world rather than try to escape them.

When I find myself discouraged by the challenges of faith, I gather hope from watching some of Summit's students living out their beliefs today. I recall Noah—a past Summit student—who was elected student body president at Dartmouth College. In his speech to the incoming freshmen, Noah pointed out that,

statistically, the incoming class was “the smartest and most diverse group of freshmen” in Dartmouth’s history. But then he went on to tell stories of a Dartmouth graduate who became a murderer, one who became a Soviet spy, and one who sexually assaulted a young girl. Intelligence is not enough, he told his young audience. They needed to be people of character.

To illustrate his point, Noah pointed to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and said that Jesus “knew the right thing to do. He knew the cost would be agonizing torture and death. But he did it anyway. That’s character.”

Noah’s point landed like a spark on the dry tinder of today’s politically charged culture. The resulting firestorm was predictable. Noah’s words were called “disrespectful,” “appalling,” and “reprehensible.” He was accused of abusing his position of power and embarrassing the student government by mentioning Jesus Christ at an institution of higher learning.

What Noah did next is something no one expected. He reached out to his critics one by one and listened to their concerns.⁵ Developing an impulse to engage rather than escape difficult situations has served Noah well. Now in his thirties, Noah is a successful corporate executive and venture capitalist who invests his free time mentoring young adults at his church.

I also recall Haley—another Summit student—who is now an executive with the National Center on Sexual Exploitation. This group stands against sexually explicit and sexually objectifying content in the media. In the past, people like Haley would have been considered scolds who wanted to impose their morality on everyone

else. But in testifying before the United Nations, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the FBI and in speaking with media outlets such as the *New York Times* and Fox News, Haley has taken an unexpected approach. She shows that sexually oriented advertising and programming are part of a complicated web of harmful practices that result in the exploitation of women and children.

As a result of the work Haley and her team have done, Google has stopped offering sexually explicit ads and removed pornographic apps from Google Play. Steam—one of the largest distributors of video games—now rejects games that include sexually graphic content. *Cosmopolitan* magazine has been removed from checkout lines at Walmart. Revcontent, one of the world's largest internet advertising networks, has removed sexually explicit and sexually objectifying content. Congress has passed historic legislation to fight sex trafficking. And Hilton, Crowne Plaza, Westin, and many other top hotel chains have stopped distributing on-demand hardcore pornography in their guest rooms.

Haley's work is strongly rooted in her Christian faith. Yet even people whose political and social views are at odds with her own seek her advice. Though just twenty-six at the time of this writing, Haley has been asked by the mayor of Washington, DC, to offer recommendations for improving child welfare and stopping child abuse.

Haley says her training at Summit Ministries helped her connect the dots between ideas and actions. She learned to think critically about the worldviews behind people's actions and the

policies governing our nation. It's about people, not just ideas. It's about relationships, not just truth.

The more divisive and angry that society becomes, the more refreshing the approaches taken by Noah and Haley seem. They've tapped into something deep about how to think and communicate the truth. They're making a difference because of—not in spite of—the compelling answers their faith provides to the most pressing issues of our time.

And yet there's a good reason I don't have thousands of stories like Noah's and Haley's to share. What they're doing is *grueling*. It involves hard thinking about reality, God, the Bible, faith, and church. It requires abandoning our unquestioned answers and navigating the tension between longing to be with Jesus and living in a way that makes a difference.

What You'll Learn along the Unquestioned Answers Journey

Like the students I work with at Summit, I'm on a journey. Yes, I head up a ministry. Yes, I have been to graduate school and have written other books. But what qualifies me to write *Unquestioned Answers* is that I'm walking alongside those I lead. I know what it feels like to be given overprocessed and prepackaged answers. I know how tempted I am to settle for the easy solution, and I don't like it.

What I want is to forsake my unquestioned answers and awaken again to the wonder of God, the Bible, and the world he made.

This book can help us

- know that the Bible is true and what it means when we say that;
- stop being at a loss for words in conversations about our faith;
- experience a fresh vision for church;
- act wisely in a culture that encourages foolishness;
- speak the truth without being judgmental;
- apply the wisdom of the Bible to everything everywhere all the time.

Along the way we'll encounter a lot of quirky people whose journeys have shed light on our own paths, from a Christian businessman who decided to confront liberal theology and sparked a global movement ... to Irish monks who inadvertently transformed education by setting out on pilgrimages ... to an Oxford professor named "Fat Head" who triggered the development of modern science ... to a writer who changed a nation by penning an encyclopedia ... to an American poet who, overcome by despair, wrote a famous hymn that brought hope to a nation bent on self-destruction.

When I look back on that hurt, resentful nine-year-old boy moving from Michigan to Kansas, I reflect on where my faith journey has taken me. My first step took place shortly after that childhood move to Kansas, when my brother and I built a bomb

in the church parking lot. It's an odd place to begin, I know, but it started a series of events that introduced me to the amazing truth of God's Word.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Simplicism differ from simplicity?
2. How would you describe the effects of Simplicism on our culture? On your life?
3. What are some clichés that you have found yourself reciting without having reflected on them?
4. What clichés are you looking forward to reading about? Why?

For videos, additional related Scripture passages, further reading, and more content specific to each unquestioned answer, visit www.unquestionedanswers.com/resources.

“God Said It; I Believe It; That Settles It for Me”

Rediscovering Truth about the Bible



When I was nine, our family packed our belongings into a sixteen-foot U-Haul truck, Volkswagen van in tow, and set out across the country. After three days of hundred-degree weather, creeping along at the federally mandated fifty-five miles per hour that drove everyone crazy in the 1970s, we arrived at our new home, a mercifully air-conditioned little saltbox house in a well-kept Kansas neighborhood.

Our new small town, Great Bend, had experienced an oil boom, resulting in well-funded schools, broad streets, parks, and a well-equipped hospital. Unlike in Detroit, my parents didn't mind letting their kids roam. So my brother, Scott, and I explored every inch of our neighborhood by bicycle.

It was culture shock to move from a city of 1.5 million people to a town of sixteen thousand. Even more startling was the transition from a church of two thousand, with thriving ministries for every age-group, to a country church so small that our family of five increased attendance by 20 percent.

Our tiny new congregation offered no youth program, so during the Wednesday evening prayer meeting, Scott and I just played outside. One evening, as we explored the property, we tried the door of a shed and found it unlocked. We peered inside. And what did we find? A lawn mower.

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” I asked Scott.

“If there's a lawn mower, there must be gasoline?” he replied.

“Exactly.”

Excited, we tiptoed into the church basement to find supplies: paper cups, masking tape, and matches. Carefully we stitched together a “bomb” and lit it in the half-empty parking lot. It's a wonder we didn't burn our hair off. As it blazed, our cup-and-tape contraption tipped over and spilled. We quickly cleaned up the mess and threw the evidence in a trash can.

We didn't think anyone had noticed, but to our surprise, the next week there was a youth group! It consisted of three boys: Scott and me, along with Burton, the son of the town's police chief. Our

leader, Don, got down on his knees to pray and encouraged us to do the same. We knelt there in awe, eyes mostly screwed shut, as Don spoke to God with reverent confidence. What started out as a means of keeping us out of trouble blossomed into a mentoring relationship that affected our lives for decades to come.

A few years ago Don and I visited shortly before his death from cancer. We sat together at the dining room table to chat, cry, and pray, knowing it would be our last meeting this side of eternity. At the end of our visit, I grabbed my jacket, and Don’s wife, Angel, took my arm.

“I want to show you something,” she said.

We walked over to the fireplace, where she pointed out a grease stain on the brick hearth.

“Do you know how that got there?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied.

“When this fireplace was brand new,” Angel informed me, “you and Scottie decided to cook hot dogs on it. They burst and dripped this grease, and it never came out.”

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad,” she quickly replied. “I just want you to know that every time we see that stain, we pray for you boys.”

Imagine that. For thirty-five years this couple had prayed for my brother and me every time they came near their fireplace. Both Scott and I are in full-time ministry today. Only in heaven will we know how many pitfalls we avoided and how many spiritual battles were won as Don and Angel stood in prayer in their tiny living room.

I'm sure it wasn't easy for them. Every week, I pestered Don with questions. "That church across town—what do *they* teach?" I would ask. "And how do we know we're right and they're wrong?" Some of my questions were more pointed: "How do we really know God exists?" "Do we need to obey *everything* in the Bible—even the Old Testament commands?" "How should Christians respond to philosophers who doubt God exists?"

Don admitted that his journey with Jesus had bypassed street-level debates about theology and philosophy. Plus, he had a hard job and a wife and four daughters to care for, so there wasn't much time to look for answers.

Something our pastor said one Sunday, though, stuck in my mind as an example of how Christians typically grapple with hard questions. After making what he seemed to think was a rather strong sermon point, he held up his Bible and said, "If you don't like it, don't take it up with me. Take it up with God. God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!"

Even as a kid, I suspected something was amiss with that kind of logic. There was no room for discussion, and asking questions seemed akin to disrespecting God himself. But I had a hard time believing that it was actually sinful for women to wear jeans and for men to have long hair, that alcohol in moderation was actually bad, or that the King James Version of the Bible was the only authorized translation.

For many years I marveled at how people like my pastor could arrive at such strong convictions through Bible passages that seemed unclear to me. I thought, *Why do I have such a hard time seeing what seems obvious to people I trust?*

The answer came to me years later when I was writing *Understanding the Faith*, a textbook about theology and apologetics used in Christian schools. Acknowledging my lack of theological training, I asked several trusted theologians to write research papers to help me sort through tough questions about God, the Bible, sin, creation, morality, hell, and other faith topics.

Reading those papers, I felt like a hillbilly on his first visit to the big city. For most of my life, I had studied the Bible one passage at a time to answer the question “How does this apply to my life today?” I had been peering through a keyhole when God wanted to swing the door wide open and reveal all of reality. The Bible is a book about everything, and it applies to everyone everywhere. As such, it is transformational, psychologically insightful, historically accurate, literarily brilliant, and inspired.

Understanding the Bible’s bigness reinvigorated my faith. The broad scope of God’s plan for the world took shape in my mind, dimming my obsession with what *I* believe and what “settles it for *me*.” I decided to embrace the challenge of viewing the Bible as special revelation from God and seeing the world through its telescoping lens.

Where Does This Unquestioned Answer Come From?

Remember when Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he had touched Jesus’s crucifixion wounds? Jesus invited Thomas’s touch but chided him, saying, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

No one wants to be a doubting Thomas. The message I absorbed growing up was that questioning is doubting, and doubting is sinning. As a prominent Christian leader asserted, “Of all the sins we can commit, doubt is the one most hated by God.”¹ If that’s true, I committed the greatest sin even at a young age. It was only after high school when I arrived at Summit Ministries that I turned a corner, but that’s a story for later in this chapter.

Those who believe we should unquestioningly accept the Bible as God’s Word often enlist the famed nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon, who proclaimed, “The Word of God can take care of itself, and will do so if we preach it, and cease defending it.... Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty, and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.”² Defending the Bible strips it of its true power. Don’t try to logically understand it; just unleash it.

This way of thinking inspired a Christian song popular when I was a kid: “God Said It; I Believe It; That Settles It.” I recently found an early music video of it that featured women in pale-pink dresses and men in powder-blue suits and white patent-leather shoes. Their lyrics state, “Though some may doubt that His Word is true, / I’ve chosen to believe it; now how about you?”³

Freeing, right? We don’t need to know why the Bible is true—we just need to believe it.

Interestingly, the Bible itself doesn’t take this perspective. The Bible claims to be inspired by God and true in its claims about God and his creation, but it also calls for examination of its claims. Can the Bible stand up to our questions, or should we just believe it and stop asking them?

Why We Say the Bible Is God’s Word— and How We Can Know It Is True

The Bible contains rules, but it’s not helpful to think of it as a rule book. As important as rule books are, they don’t inspire devotion. Imagine curling up with a cup of coffee and your company’s employment manual. Good times, right?

Instead of a rule book, think of the Bible as a compass. When my children and I tested for our advanced open-water diving certification, we descended to forty feet below the surface and took turns swimming in a square, a hundred feet in each direction. At the farthest point, we were about 140 feet from the rest of our group in an environment where visibility was fifty feet at best. Believe me, at that moment I didn’t want a compass that pointed at *me*; I wanted one that offered a reliable reference point outside me. Only then could I find my way back.

Just as a compass points us north, the Bible points us to God. It reveals God, making the unknown known. Through revelation, God’s truth rises like the dawn, making clearer who God is, who we are, and what kind of world we live in. The Bible is God’s Word.

Saying this doesn’t mean the Bible magically fell from heaven leather bound, as my friend Jonathan Morrow whimsically phrased it.⁴ Rather, the Bible was assembled through a human and divine process. When we say the Bible is God’s Word, we’re saying it is inspired by God and that what it claims as true is indeed true.

Second Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is *breathed out by God* and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The Greek word for “breathed out by God” is

theopneustos. It means “inspired by God.” To say Scripture is inspired is to say that what its authors wrote was precisely what God himself wanted to be communicated.

About three thousand times in the Bible, the various writers claim to have been guided by the Holy Spirit.⁵ The stunning result is a completely coherent book made up of sixty-six separate books written over the course of 1,500 years by forty writers, from kings and philosophers to fishermen and tentmakers ... yet all the pieces fit together.

Many theologians go beyond *inspiration* to also say that the Bible is without error, or *inerrant*. This doesn't mean no errors were made in transmitting the text through time. It means that when Scripture is carefully interpreted in light of the culture in which it was written and the means of communication common to that time, it is completely true in what it says about God and his creation.⁶ There is a great deal of evidence for both claims—that the Bible is inspired by God and that it is without error. This evidence comes internally from the Bible itself and externally from scholarly investigation.

Internal Evidence for the Bible's Claims

Internally the Bible claims authority for itself. Since Jesus is at its center, most evangelical theologians start with Jesus and work their way backward and forward. Looking backward, we see that Jesus treated the Old Testament as authoritative. In his earthly ministry, Jesus claimed authority (John 5:22). Looking forward, we see that Jesus granted his own authority to the apostles whose ministry carried on after his resurrection (Matt. 28:18–20).

Jesus didn't treat the Old Testament as past. He referred to it as the eternal truth of God. The Gospels contain many examples of Jesus quoting from the Old Testament. When Jesus quoted Scripture, he used the perfect tense (“it is written” or “it stands written”). These teachings are not simply in the *past*, Jesus was saying; they are for *now*.⁷

Further, Jesus claimed not only to be God's spokesman but also to be God in the flesh. In contrast to the Old Testament prophets who said, “Thus says the LORD,” Jesus said, “Truly, truly, *I* say to you.” He manifested divine authority to reveal what God wants us to understand.⁸ Jesus claimed to be the I AM of the Old Testament (John 8:58). He said that he and God are one essence (10:30) and that those who had seen him had seen God (14:9). Jesus claimed authority over heaven and earth, including the power to judge (5:22).

Jesus's claims astonished his audience, his enemies, and his disciples.⁹ They astonish us today too and leave us with a choice. Many people appreciate Jesus's *decency* but not his *divinity*. They approve of his teachings but not of his claim to be God. As we have seen, though, Jesus did not claim to be only a good moral teacher. He claimed that his words were God's words.

As far as the rest of the New Testament is concerned, Jesus conferred authority on those he had personally encountered before the completion of his earthly ministry. John 14:25–26 says, “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

The disciples did just what Jesus said. They proclaimed the good news in Jesus's name (see Acts 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 12, 17–18, 30). Even

Jesus's enemies acknowledged the authority with which Jesus's disciples spoke, recognizing that "they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

External Evidence for the Bible's Claims

Lots of evidence outside the Bible also shows that it didn't proceed from the fanciful imaginations of spiritual people but is based on actual events in history. Because of this, we can use historical evidence to verify that the Bible is true.

Those copying the Scriptures from one generation to the next proceeded with great care, leading us to believe that the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts we have today vary little from the original versions. Beginning in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a series of caves in the Judean Desert of Israel. One of those scrolls was the nearly complete text of the book of Isaiah. Scholars dated this scroll as about one thousand years older than the next-oldest copy, yet between the old and the newer versions, there was a variation of less than 5 percent. Most of the differences were just spelling variations and obvious scribal errors.¹⁰

In the early 1990s the late biblical scholar Philip R. Davies claimed there was no way to know whether King David from the Bible actually existed.¹¹ But just a year after his book was published, an inscription referring to the "house of David" was found at the Tel Dan archaeological site. Israel Finkelstein, professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University, remarked, "Biblical nihilism collapsed overnight with the discovery of the David inscription."¹² More recently archaeologists have discovered what they believe to be a palace of David, providing additional evidence for his existence.¹³

So much evidence for the historical accuracy of the Bible now exists that journalist Jeffery Sheler remarked, “We have found the Bible consistently and substantially affirmed as a credible and reliable source of history.”¹⁴

That’s not all. Sources outside the Bible—such as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger—demonstrate that Jesus really existed, he was thought to have performed miracles, he was crucified under the authority of a governor named Pontius Pilate, and a community of worshippers grew significantly based on the belief that he was still alive.¹⁵

Shouldn’t this kind of evidence at least cause us to give the Bible the benefit of the doubt?¹⁶

What Should We Do Now?

Our family station wagon chugged up the narrow streets of Manitou Springs, Colorado.

“This must be the place,” my father said, looking up at a quaint antique hotel.

I stared out the window at the sight. At age seventeen and freshly graduated from high school, I felt ready to spread my wings. From the two-week program I was attending, I would go straight to debate camp and then off to college.

We strolled into the dimly lit lobby and came face to face with a tanned, athletic-looking man sporting huge glasses. He introduced himself as Dave Noebel, but everyone called him Doc. I had no idea at the time how knowledgeable he was—I knew only my own desperate search for truth.

“Doc,” I said, “I hope you have a lot of answers, because I have a lot of questions.”

“Tiger,” Noebel replied, using his favorite term of affection, “at Summit we’re not afraid of questions.”

I couldn’t believe it. Asking questions—hard questions—was okay? Seriously? It was nearly the opposite of what I had come to think Christians believed. That was the moment my turnaround began. Like a satellite ever so slightly altering trajectory with the burst of a thruster, I began moving into a new orbit.

Looking back, I can see that those who proclaim “God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me” are casting about for a way to show that their beliefs are based on solid rock, not shifting sand. But the truth is so much more profound than this saying indicates. God’s Word doesn’t stop our inquiries; it invites them.

Now when people tell me they have questions, I respond, “Good for you. Wrestle with them. Explore them. And don’t forget to doubt your doubts as much as you doubt what God says.” I say this because the Bible itself calls for believers to be deeply familiar with it (Ps. 119), interpret it accurately (2 Tim. 2:15), defend it (1 Pet. 3:15), and answer arguments against it (2 Cor. 10:5). No other holy book issues an explicit call for careful study the way the Bible does.

The Bible promises several benefits to believers who engage in such study:

1. *Blessing*: delight, freedom from shame, wisdom, hope, and protection against doing evil (Ps. 119:6, 11, 47, 49, 98).

2. *Spiritual fruit*: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).
3. *Freedom from spiritual bondage*: The apostle Paul wrote, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).
4. *Direction in life*: The book of Proverbs tells us, “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (3:6).
5. *The ability to grasp truth and defeat error*: In 2 Corinthians we read, “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (10:4).

From its beginning the Bible has been under attack. It has been picked apart, banned, or mocked by critics. It has been confiscated and destroyed, and its translators have been burned at the stake. God’s Word cannot be stopped, but its opponents never seem to learn that.

Often in history, trust in the Bible seemed to revive even amid harsh criticism. One such instance occurred in the early 1900s, a time period that many today think of as Victorian and somehow purer. The truth is, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, truth began falling out of fashion. Theologians climbed all over one another in their haste to explain away the Bible’s claims. Evolution disproved the Bible’s creation account, they said. Only the naive believed in miracles. The Bible was full of contradictions. Church fathers had omitted gospels that didn’t fit their narrative.

Key biblical figures such as King David never existed. And on and on. Firm believers felt under siege. The media portrayed them as ignorant hicks.

A businessman named Lyman Stewart decided to act. He recruited a pastor and a professor to compile essays defending the truth of the Bible and refuting its critics. With Stewart's financial backing, three million volumes of this twelve-volume series, *The Fundamentals*, made their way to pastors, missionaries, and other leaders around the world.¹⁷

The response was overwhelming. Hundreds of thousands of people wrote, most expressing gratitude for how *The Fundamentals* had helped them stand strong. Attendance at biblically faithful churches exploded. This fundamentalist movement transformed into a larger movement—evangelicalism—that included young and old, Democrat and Republican, urban and rural. In the end, it became one of the most successful religious movements in history.¹⁸

Today evangelicalism has spread to 129 nations and six hundred million people.¹⁹ Evangelicalism is growing twice as fast as Islam.²⁰ What has taken place is really an extended revival, though it was easy to miss because it was based on convictions rather than emotional ecstasy.

Careful study—or questioning—of the Bible has inspired believers through the centuries to seek a deeper faith. A world-changing faith. The Bible's moral guidance led them to abolish slavery, ban child molestation, seek dignity for women, form hospitals and schools,

secure liberty and justice for all, advance science, develop great art and architecture, and protect human life.²¹

The Bible begs to be understood, defended, and applied. And for the record, the famed preacher Charles Spurgeon, the theologian often quoted as denying the need for apologetics, would have agreed with the “defend” part. In an 1888 sermon titled “Holding Fast the Faith,” Spurgeon said explicitly, “We must defend the faith; for what would have become of us if our fathers had not maintained it?”²²

Spurgeon’s question left me thinking, *What is faith, really? Is all faith really just blind faith?* As I thought about it, I remembered a friend of mine, a blind man who through faith saw the world clearly and changed thousands of lives.

Discussion Questions

1. What beliefs or teachings that you learned as a child have you adjusted as you matured in your faith?
2. What doubts have you wrestled with since becoming a Christian?
3. How have you benefited from studying the Bible?
4. What are some things we ought to keep in mind about God’s Word as we study it?