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1. How to Figure Out Where You’re Going

Let’s say you parachute into the middle of New York City’s Central Park. When you land, a mysterious stranger says to you, “There is a $5,000 diamond necklace waiting for you at Tiffany and Co. It’s yours, free, on one condition. You have to claim it in the next twenty minutes, or the deal is off.”

Even if you care nothing for diamond necklaces, this would get your attention. You could always sell it and keep the cash. “But what is Tiffany and Co., and how do I get there?” you ask.

“I can’t tell you,” says your anonymous source. “You’ll have to find out on your own.”
Of course, you suspect a trick. After all, you just parachuted in. You know nothing about your would-be benefactor. But the necklace is worth a lot, so you have a strong incentive to check it out.

Your heart begins pounding. You feel your pocket—smart phone must have fallen out during the jump. You’ve never been in New York City before. The time limit creates a sense of urgency—if you just wandered around for a few hours, you might eventually find Tiffany and Co. But you don’t have hours. You have twenty minutes.

If you want the necklace, you’re going to have to overcome your fear (and your embarrassment at dragging a parachute behind you) and start asking for directions. You will probably have three questions: Where am I? Where is Tiffany and Co.? What is the fastest way to get there?

But what kind of person do you ask? It must be someone who knows New York City generally and where certain stores are in particular. The homeless guy on the bench may know the layout of New York City, but he doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who would know much about jewelry stores. The skateboarding teenager probably won’t know either. Will the mom pushing the baby in a stroller?

Let’s say you find a source you think might be credible. How do you know he or she is telling the truth? After all, everyone in New York acts like they know what they’re doing, but some of them must be just as lost as you. In fact, they may be wrong and not even know it. Or worse, your source may have a sick sense of humor and think it’s funny to send you running off in the wrong direction. Will you ask more than one person to get confirmation? What do you do if their answers conflict?

From the middle of Central Park to Tiffany and Co. on Fifth Avenue on the southeast side of the park is less than a mile. You can easily make it there inside of twenty minutes, especially if you jog. But it will take a few minutes to get directions and to orient yourself. There’s no time for mistakes.

If you want the necklace, you’ll only have one chance.

2. Getting Directions for Life

Some things about the search for the Tiffany and Co. necklace are very much like real life. People who figure out what works in life are rewarded. The rewards may be tangible (getting money or things) or intangible (peace of mind, satisfaction with a job well done). The rewards may be temporal (in this life) or eternal (beyond death). Either way, there is a time limit—one out of every one person dies (you’ve probably noticed). There is a real world with real rules. You can’t set off to the north and expect to reach a southerly destination (except after a very long walk and swim around the earth).

This book was written to aid you in your exploration for God: Is he real? What is he like? Is what the Bible says about him authoritative and worthy of obedience? Many people question whether this is a valid pursuit. Some think it is irrelevant whether God exists. Others see belief in God and the Bible as an anesthetic: they exist only to help those cope who have a low tolerance for pain. Still others see God and the Bible as fictions invented to help the powerful oppress the weak.

We should not be too quick to dismiss these claims. There are undoubtedly people who claim to be Christians but live as if God is irrelevant. And we can easily imagine people embracing Christianity because they want a crutch to help them hobble through life or a club with which to bully others.
Skeptics, cynics, atheists, agnostics, and firm believers all have at least one thing in common: we don't know everything. Beyond general things (such as how to walk without falling down, how to feed ourselves, etc.), we need help. Think of all the confusing issues humans face:

- Is there a God? And what do I understand to be true about God?
- How should I respond to those who believe differently, especially those whose understanding of God tells them to harm people like me?
- Where did we come from? Are we really a special creation of God or the result of a random process of evolution? What does this mean for how we live together?
- What should I do for a job? What kinds of jobs are worth doing? How can we create more jobs?
- What does God want from me? How can I even know? What if people who have a different view of God try to stop me from doing what God wants?
- Should I get married? What is marriage anyway? If two people of the same sex want to marry one another, is that truly marriage?
- How can I live in harmony with those around me? Which political and economic policies are most harmonious with human flourishing? How should we respond when bad decisions made by leaders create disharmony?

It's tempting to dismiss these questions as trivial, but they matter. In the end, we have to act on what we know, and all our questions and actions will lead us to some destination. You might say, “I refuse to think about this. I’m not going anywhere,” but you actually are. In this case, nowhere is surely as much a destination as somewhere.

All these questions about direction in life matter because we humans are not mere animals; we need to make sense of the world, not just survive in it. Among all living creatures, only human beings seem to wrestle with why we exist. G. K. Chesterton said,

Man is a very strange animal . . . Not that there is anything particularly queer about our physical equipment; this is all quite reasonable. But gorillas have hands as we do, yet use them for very little, and never to play the piano or skip stones or whittle or write letters. Dolphins have bigger brains than we do, but you seldom hear them discoursing on nuclear physics. Chihuahuas are more hairless than we, but have never thought to wear clothes. . . . Man alone weeps for cause, and “is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter.”

The products of our musings and mental processing are called ideas, and our lives are full of them. Some ideas accurately reflect our world. Many do not. Some help us; others cause harm. Are there clues we can use to figure out the difference?

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3. Is One Direction Better Than Another?

Alice was completely overwhelmed by Wonderland and at an absolute loss for where to go. She asked the Cheshire cat, “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don’t much care where”—said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat. “—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation. “Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

The dialogue between Alice and the Cat is more profound than it might appear. Even if we don’t care enough to think deeply about truth and meaning, our ideas lead us somewhere. Of that we can be certain. But where do they lead?

Our culture floods our senses with ideas—advertisements, programming, conversations, text messages. All this noise can seem like random, neutral bits of information, but if we look more closely, we realize that every bit of information contains proposals about how the world works. The ideas communicated might be true or false, but they are not neutral. They have the power, for better or worse, to change how we see the world. Over time patterns emerge that hold certain ideas together and that conform our lives to values and ways of living. The ideas we encounter may be complex, but they are not random.

We are influenced, even if only with tiny nudges, by this information. The average person makes a few big decisions every day (should I study for this test?) and ten thousand to twenty thousand small ones (should I eat the chips first or the sandwich?). Taken together, that which influences our decisions affects the way we live, and possibly even the direction of our lives.

Overwhelmed, many “tune out” and believe whatever they’re told. History tells how unthinking people become the victims of ideas. A characteristic of those in the rising generation, however, is their dissatisfaction with the “That’s just the way it is, so stop asking questions” approach to tough questions. They crave meaning and know they must go beyond seeing the world in “bits and pieces,” as Francis Schaeffer put it, to seeing the big picture.

What we need is a map. Maps provide clear mental models of the terrain we must navigate. A good map shows where the various towns, roads, and landmarks are situated in relation to one another. An “ideas map” would describe the contours of the world of thought and help us navigate the information we encounter. The more accurate our map, the more we’ll understand. On the map of life, there are five major landmarks: five questions we must ask and answer whether we want to or not.

4. Five Questions Affecting Our Direction in Life

Obviously, mastering the world of ideas is a complex undertaking. I think of this every time I visit the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. “The Bod” is one of the world’s great libraries and the repository of more than 11 million books and artifacts. As you imagine Oxford’s

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majestic spires, recall the Apostle Paul’s statement: “Take captive every thought to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). How many thoughts are in all those books? How could a person possibly master them all?

Thoughtful people have always felt overwhelmed by how much there is to know. Even King Solomon said, “Of the making of books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Think how many more books have been written in the centuries and millennia since he said that! Today the world of ideas is more complex than ever. Which ideas should we take seriously? Which should we dismiss as frivolous, incoherent, or patently ridiculous? And which should we actively oppose as dangerous?

Maybe it will help to identify five landmarks on the “idea map,” which form five questions every human must grapple with.

**Origin. Where did we come from?** Some say we were created by God to bear his image. Others say we evolved through random chance processes. One American Indian creation story begins with, “The woman and the man dreamed that God was dreaming them.” So were they already created and dreaming, or were they part of God’s dream? Is the story intended to be taken literally, or is it poetry? The various creation stories contradict one another. They can’t all be right, but which is wrong?

**Identity. Who are we?** What is a human being? Are we more than just animals? Does every human being have intrinsic worth and dignity, or is worth and dignity determined by external factors, skills, or attributes? Further, most people suspect something is wrong with us. What exactly, if anything, is wrong, and how do we fix it?

**Meaning. What is real and true, and how do we know?** What is life all about? Is there purpose to our lives, or must we contrive it somehow? Is reality real or an illusion? Is there such a thing as “the good life,” and if so, what is it? What makes life worth living at all? Why do humans not only exist but also wonder about why they exist? Will the answers I embrace determine what I ultimately live for and the lengths to which I should go to achieve it?

**Morality. How should we live?** Are there rules for the good life? Who makes them? Are they true for all times and all cultures, or do they depend on our circumstances? A study by Barna Research says 83 percent of young adults said moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6 percent said moral truth is absolute. Is morality based on feelings? Does morality change if our feelings change?

**Destiny. What happens next?** Where is history headed? Is there an afterlife? If so, what is it like? Clearly there is something wrong with the world: poverty, injustice, pain, and sickness exist. How do we explain this? And what do we do about it? Some say bad things are just an illusion while others say bad things result from evolution and have no larger meaning. Still others blame sin. Some say there is a possibility of redemption, but there are many different ideas about what that means. Should we try to fix things or merely look forward to a life beyond this one?

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And just when we think we've got everything figured out, one question continues to haunt us all: How do we know our answers to these questions are right?

5. Why We Must Understand the Times

The Bible tells of a tribe in ancient Israel called Issachar, whose men had an “understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). It’s a good goal for life. Those who understand the times aren’t as likely to be tricked by wrong ideas. What’s more, because they understand reality more clearly, they can come up with solutions to the problems that plague us all.

The Old Testament often uses the Hebrew word derek to describe a direction-filled life. Derek means “the way.” According to seminary professor Joel Williams, the ancient Hebrews thought “to walk in the ways of God meant to live according to his will and commandments.” Deuteronomy 10:12 says that we should “walk in all his ways.” Isaiah 40:3 says to “prepare the way of the Lord.” In life, there is a right way to go and a wrong way to go. There is a way of wisdom and a way of foolishness. There is a right way and a wicked way. There is a way of life and a way of death.

If you can understand the right way, the wrong way will become evident. If you can know how to stay on the right way, you can discern when you (and others) deviate from the path. The Apostle Paul, for example, in his lengthy and complex letter to the Christians in Rome, begins with a summary of how humanity had lost its way:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:18–21)

In this passage Paul describes what happens when people reject God. As a friend of mind puts it, when people do not think well of God in their minds, God gives them minds that do not think well.

8 Joel F. Williams, “Way,” in Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, ed. D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers and A. B. Beck (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1370–71. Williams says, “In the concrete sense, a road (Deut. 1:2; Ruth 1:7) or a movement along a particular path, i.e., a journey (Exod. 13:21; 1 Kgs. 19:4). However, Heb. derek was also employed more broadly. To walk in the ways of God meant to live according to his will and commandments (Deut. 10:12-13; 1 Kgs. 3:14). In Isaiah ‘the way of the Lord’ can refer to God’s provision of deliverance from enslavement or exile (Isa. 40:3; 43:16-19). The word was often used to identify the overall direction of a person’s life, whether righteous or wicked (Judg. 2:17-19; Ps. 1:6; cf. Matt 7:13-14), wise or foolish (Prov. 4:11; 12:15). In the NT Gk. ἡδός has a similar range of meanings. In Mark’s Gospel it is used repeatedly to present Jesus as ‘on the way,’ i.e., on his journey to Jerusalem (Mark 8:27; 9:33-34; 10:32). The broader context adds a deeper significance to these more literal references, since Jesus’ willingness to go the way of suffering provides an example for his followers who must also prepare to suffer (Mark 8:31-34). In John 14:6 Jesus claims to be ‘the way,’ i.e., the only means of access to God (cf. Heb. 9:8; 10:19-20). In Acts ‘the Way’ functions as a title for the Christian message (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22) or the Christian community (9:2; 24:14).”
While it might sound broadminded to argue that we should invite everyone to live as they please, the world does not change to fit our, or their, whims and desires. If Christianity is true, then it accurately describes the world as it actually is. Rejecting Christianity, then, is the same as rejecting reality itself. Inevitably, the real world crashes in, revealing the consequences of rejecting God’s rules and patterns.

For over fifteen years, British physician and psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple cared for the poorest of the poor in London’s slums. He observed in the process that the government’s attempts to show compassion to the poor actually worsened their situations. Drunkenness, promiscuity, gluttony, and abuse were common, along with all of the health consequences you might expect from such lifestyles.

As Dalrymple tried to heal people’s wounds, he asked, “Why do you live like this?” Stunningly, he concluded that these vulnerable individuals had simply embraced—and practiced—the ideas about gender, sexual liberation, and meaning that were taught in theories at top universities and in the media.

In his book *Life at the Bottom*, Dalrymple turns his acerbic wit on twentieth-century intellectuals who “sought to free our sexual relations of all social, contractual or moral obligations and meaning whatsoever, so that henceforth only raw sexual desire itself would count in our decision making.” Dalrymple shows that the results of adopting these ideas “both literally and wholesale” are horrifying.

If anyone wants to see what sexual relations are like, freed of contractual and social obligations, let him look at the chaos of the personal lives of members of the underclass. Here are abortions procured by abdominal kung fu; children who have children, in numbers unknown before the advent of chemical contraception and sex education; women abandoned by the father of their child a month before or a month after delivery; insensate jealousy, the reverse of the coin of general promiscuity, that results in the most hideous oppression and violence; serial stepfatherhood that leads to sexual and physical abuse of children on a mass scale; and every kind of loosening of the distinction between the sexually permissible and the impermissible.9

After reading Dalrymple’s graphic portrayal of the consequences of creating our own moral standards, we need to reevaluate the wisdom of the world in light of the wisdom of God; we need to rediscover the differences between right and wrong, good and evil.

6. CAN WE KNOW THE RIGHT WAY? CAN WE KNOW ANYTHING AT ALL?

When people make up a worldview, they tend to make up one they believe they can successfully live out. The Christian worldview is not like that. The Scriptures reveal a God who does not change the rules and patterns of reality just because people do not like them. He does not adjust right or wrong according to the actions and philosophies of any particular community. As Flannery O’Connor said, “Truth does not change by our ability to stomach it emotionally.”10 Conversely, God does not consider something to be true just because people do manage to stomach it or because it seems to give them success.

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But God does care that we know the truth he makes plain to us. He cares that we understand the consequences of turning a blind eye to his standards of righteous thought and behavior.

The study of what knowledge is, how we know, and how our knowledge relates to what is real is called epistemology (episteme is Greek for “knowledge”). What we believe about knowledge itself serves as a kind of greenhouse in which we nurture our ideas and transplant them into every area of life.

While it may not be possible to know everything, surely it is possible to know something. Yet some disagree even with this, claiming that we can’t know anything outside our own “personal” reality and that we must instead get in touch with consciousness—our “higher selves.” Trying to search for knowledge outside ourselves wilts our true potential, New Spiritualist writer Shakti Gawain believes: “When we consistently suppress and distrust our intuitive knowingness, looking instead for [external] authority, validation, and approval from others, we give our personal power away.”

The idea that truth and morality depend on our personal or cultural situation is called relativism. If relativism is correct, one of the main goals in life should be to remove any barriers people might face in finding truth for themselves. But isn’t this dangerous? Even Paul Kurtz, an atheist philosopher who helped develop a philosophy called “secular humanism,” acknowledged that it can be:

Nevertheless, the humanist is faced with a crucial ethical problem: Insofar as he has defended an ethic of freedom, can he develop a basis for moral responsibility? Regretfully, merely to liberate individuals from authoritarian social institutions, whether church or state, is no guarantee that they will be aware of their moral responsibility to others. The contrary is often the case. Any number of social institutions regulate conduct by some means of norms and rules, and sanctions are imposed for enforcing them. . . . Once these sanctions are ignored, we may end up with [a man] concerned with his own personal lust for pleasure, ambition, and power, and impervious to moral constraints.

Kurtz understands that unless there is some revealed moral truth we are all obligated to obey, anything can be construed as good or bad relative to the situation in which we find ourselves. Even though we strive to do the right thing, if there is no absolute standard by which to judge, then we may honestly disagree among ourselves what the right thing is.

So if there are no absolute standards, how do we decide who is right and wrong when it comes to making societal decisions? According to Corliss Lamont, who donated the proceeds of his father’s business fortune to build a library at Harvard University and in turn was able to serve as Harvard’s “humanist chaplain,” the answer is easy: intelligence. “For the Humanist,” Lamont said, “stupidity is just as great a sin as selfishness; and ‘the moral obligation to be intelligent’ ranks always among

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11 Some philosophers posit the existence of categories of meaning that exist whether we know about them or not, and which make knowledge possible (idealism). Others focus on what we can know through experience (empiricism). Still others focus on using abstract concepts such as logical arguments to create a structure through which we can know things (rationalism). The postmodern view that knowledge is constructed through our social experiences is called constructivism.
12 Shakti Gawain, Living in the Light: Follow Your Inner Guidance to Create a New Life and a New World (San Rafael, CA: New World Library, 1986), 69.
the highest of duties.” The implication of this statement is that only intelligent people are capable of making correct moral choices, leading to the assumption that intelligent people are to act as the moral compass for the rest of society. The smartest people should be in charge, and the rest of us must follow.

But surely some intelligent people are evil, right? Should we believe what they “know” just because they’re smart? There must be a better way. Christianity may have an answer, but it leads to a whole lot of other questions.

7. Is It Truly Godly to Seek Knowledge?

The Bible calls on Christians to have their minds and hearts renewed to discern right from wrong and good from evil (Romans 12:2) and to be renewed in the spirit of their minds (Ephesians 4:17–22).

But for some Christians, this mission is at odds with what they wrongly understand Christianity to be. Some say it is a waste of time and even sinful to talk about non-Christian ideas. We should just study the truth, they say. Many even quote the passage, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:20, 25).

Closely read what the passage actually says. It doesn’t say that philosophy or scholarship or debating is bad. It says that approaching life from a worldview not centered in God is a foolish thing to do. Studying is not bad—being taken captive by false ideas is. The Bible is full of examples of people who understood the truth from God’s perspective and were better thinkers and leaders as a result. Daniel, for example, was even considered by a pagan king to be the wisest of men because his heart and mind were completely committed to God.

Similarly, some think Colossians 2:8 prohibits Christians from the study of philosophy when it says, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” Have philosophies deceived people? Certainly. But it does not follow that philosophy itself is deceptive and should not be studied. Rather, we should be wary of any idea basing itself in human wisdom rather than Christ. Christian philosophers, then, must work hard to operate from a knowledge of Christ and a desire to serve their neighbors, helping them find release from their own captivity of heart and mind.

This leads us back to the idea of knowledge. To know something about a subject means to be acquainted with the facts and truths surrounding it. A close examination of Scripture shows that God cares very much about knowledge.

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15 Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
16 Ephesians 4:17–22, “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.”
• Psalm 19:1–4—“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”
• Proverbs 2:6—“For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”
• Proverbs 18:15—“An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.”
• Hosea 4:6—“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”
• Philippians 1:9—“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.”

So God does care about what we know. But does it really matter whether we understand the times and know what we ought to do? Can we even claim to know what people “ought” to do?

8. If Knowledge Is Important to God, Why Isn’t It Important to Christians?

Many people believe Christianity can’t contribute to the world’s body of knowledge. A professor once told me, “You believe what you believe because you have faith. I believe what I believe because I have the facts.” Ouch. Was my professor’s assessment correct?

Nancy Pearcey is a professor and author who has studied the Christian worldview for decades. In her book *Total Truth* she says the confusion over what we can know stems from an uncertainty about “upper vs. lower story truth.” The problem, Pearcey says, is that we have created an artificial separation between “fact”—what is demonstrably true—and “value”—what is important. She explains the idea as it was described by her mentor, Francis Schaeffer:

Using the metaphor of a building, [Schaeffer] warned that truth had been split into two stories. The lower story consists of scientific facts, which are held to be empirically testable and universally valid. The upper story includes things like morality, theology, and aesthetics, which are now regarded as subjective and culturally relative. Essentially the upper story became a convenient dumping ground for anything that an empiricist worldview did not recognize as real. Schaeffer used a simple graphic, which we can adapt like this:

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VALUES: Private, subjective, relative
________________________________________
FACTS: Public, objective, universal
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This dichotomy has grown so pervasive that most people do not even realize they hold it.”

For Pearcey, people have come to accept this fact/value split and don’t even question it anymore, even though it pushes Christian thought to the fringes of society. Pearcey isn’t the only one who has noticed this. J. P. Moreland, a respected philosopher and evangelical Christian, says,
There has emerged a secular/sacred separation in our understanding of the Christian life with the result that Christian teaching and practice are privatized and placed in a separate compartment from the public or so-called secular activities of life. The withdrawal of the corporate body of Christ from the public sphere of ideas is mirrored by our understanding of what is required to produce an individual disciple. Religion has become personal, private, and too often, simply a matter of “how I feel about things.” By contrast, the culture encourages me to invoke my intellect in my secular, public life. By way of example, I’m always encouraged to use my intellect in how I approach my vocation, select a house, or learn to use a computer. But within the sphere of my private, spiritual life of faith, it is my heart, and my heart alone, that operates. The life of the mind is thus separated, broken off, and compartmentalized as a function of the “secular” life instead of more naturally being integrated with the spiritual.

As a result, Sunday school classes, discipleship materials, and sermons too often address the heart and not the head, or focus on personal growth and piety and not on cultivating an intellectual love for God in my vocation.18

Clearly, both Pearcey and Moreland think it is incorrect to separate the world into the secular and sacred, into facts and values. The only way to overcome this artificial separation is to recover Christianity as a knowledge tradition. To do that, we have to believe God is actually real and has authority as opposed to being just a figment of our imaginations. As it turns out, this question of authority is one of the trickiest questions of our day.

9. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE AUTHORITY?

Who has authority? Too often we think we do. It’s common to hear, “I don’t think God would send anyone to hell,” or “I would never worship a God who didn’t allow people in love to get married.” In these cases, the speaker claims authority on behalf of (or over) God. Is this legitimate? To answer this question we need to understand what authority is all about in the first place.

Consider two definitions of the word “authority” from The Concise Oxford Dictionary: (1) “The power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience;” and (2) “the power to influence others, especially because of one’s commanding manner or one’s recognized knowledge about something.”19 Let’s call the first definition “hard” authority, and let’s call the second “soft” authority. Let’s take a look at each in turn.

**Hard authority** is the power to give orders and enforce obedience. In the military, the General has hard authority over the Captain. If a Captain disobeys the General’s direct order, the Captain can be court-martialed and imprisoned. On the road, a policeman has hard authority to enforce the speed limit and issue penalties for violations. Here are three characteristics of hard authority:

1. **Hard authority is extrinsic.** It resides in the office rather than in the person. The off-duty policeman may not be allowed to issue tickets. An army Captain is no longer obligated to accept orders from a retired General.
2. **Hard authority is hierarchical.** Both parties understand that one has standing over the other. “Because I said so!” is a valid, though not necessarily winsome, argument when a General gives commands to a Captain.
3. **Hard authority commands obedience because it is punitive.** It has “teeth”; if you resist, there will be consequences.

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Soft authority, on the other hand, comes from the power of influence. People possess it because others respect who they are and what they know. Upon his retirement, the General in the example above may offer counsel, but not orders, to the military. A police officer may advise you on how to protect your home from burglars. A medical doctor may give you advice when you’re sick. Teachers tell students how to improve their work. Soft authority, then, also has three identifying characteristics:

1. **Soft authority is intrinsic.** It resides within the person. Others may be wise to follow it, but they are not compelled to do so.
2. **Soft authority is relational.** A person who obeys it does so because the advice seems sound, or because he or she trusts the source.
3. **Soft authority persuades obedience rather than commands it.** It is non-punitive. Those who resist may face consequences, but they aren't forced to act on penalty of law.

Unless you've joined the military or have agreed by contract to obey in certain ways, most of the authority in your life is probably soft authority. This is not to say that there are no consequences for ignoring authority. In the situation of the off-duty police officer, or the medical doctor, or the teacher, the law permits you to ignore the advice you've been given. But you might run a higher risk of burglary or stay sick longer or do poorly in school, even though you won't go to jail as a result.

Even so, the categories of hard and soft authority overlap more than you might think. If you take a stand for a certain political position, your college professor might grade you down. Sometimes people are denied job promotions because they refuse to commit unethical acts. Sometimes Christian actors are denied parts in movies because they refuse to use vulgar language or perform nude.

As we will see in later chapters, Christianity is based on the authority of God as revealed both generally in nature and specifically in the Bible. Following Christ will lead to a life of peace with God that is not contingent upon your circumstances. And one day, according to the Bible, Jesus will return as King of kings and Lord of lords (see Revelation 19:16). On that day he will render judgment, bestow rewards, and punish evil. God's authority is both hard and soft, intrinsic and extrinsic, obligatory and persuasive, relational and hierarchical.

**10. Why Should We Submit to God’s Authority?**

Obviously, submitting to God’s authority as revealed in the Bible is a weighty matter. Some people have no problem doing it. Others intellectually know they should obey God but struggle to do so. Still others reject God’s authority entirely. These different responses usually have something to do with a person’s early experiences of authority.

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20 Revelation 19:16, “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”
Our earliest experience with authority is to believe or obey our parents, teachers, and pastors. At first, it doesn't even occur to us to doubt them. Over time we gradually learn that they are not expert authorities on everything; they are capable of being wrong. If we are rebellious, we might think this gives us the right to ignore them entirely. We no longer fear what they will do to us, so we no longer respond to their commands. Of course, in disobeying these authorities we choose to obey someone else—usually the opinions of our peers or popular culture icons. We're selective, often unreasonably so, and refuse to respond to our parents’ “Because I said so” but unquestioningly obey a rock star whose best argument is “Because I said so.”

Imagine a student we'll call Dalton. Dalton grows up in a strongly authoritarian (“hard”) church and is so accustomed to being told “Because I said so” that he stops questioning it. His problem isn’t unanswered questions but unquestioned answers.

When Dalton arrives at his History of Civilizations class at college, the professor says the Bible is filled with non-historical myths, a claim illustrated with apparently compelling examples. His own lectures, the professor promises, will strive to reflect the consensus of today's best scholars, regardless of where they lead. The professor is popular and winsome, not mean or angry. He's funny in class, and to disagree with him is to appear grumpy and humorless. In fact, he is a genuinely nice person, at one point taking the time to help Dalton figure out a complex registration schedule when nobody else would. Compared to the rigid voices from Dalton's past, the professor is very appealing.

How should Dalton reconcile the authority of his church and the authority of his professor?

We evaluate authorities all the time. Should we believe the politician who tells us what we want to hear? Should we believe the weather person's forecast? Should we believe the friend who says, “You have to see this movie!”? Sometimes we believe what others say because we lack good reason not to. Plus, if we had to try to evaluate every claim—for example, asking three people instead of one what time it is—we would end up in gridlock. If I ask someone for directions, I don't know if the person is honest, sane, or knowledgeable, but my life experience tells me that people don't usually tell pointless lies to strangers. Similarly, if my history teacher says George Washington died December 14, 1799, or that John F. Kennedy was born May 29, 1917, I have no reason to doubt her.

Evaluating authority is much harder if we're filled with doubt. If you've ever engaged in online debates about faith, you know how many people out there are conspiracy theorists: “Your priest was deceiving you—it's a conspiracy to keep the church in power!” “You were lied to by your parents—it's a conspiracy to keep you from living the good life!” Can you prove there is no conspiracy to deceive you? Probably not. But just because a skeptic (or cynic) raises questions does not mean his doubts should be considered "authoritative." Instead we should gather reliable sources (“authorities”) and life experiences, think about them carefully, and then act on them.

Most people who have considered the claims of Christianity have doubts about those claims. How do I know the Bible is true? If something is in the Bible, do I have to obey it? What does the Bible itself say about obeying authorities? Am I obligated to follow the Bible even if those who say they believe it are following it poorly? These are important questions, but in themselves they are not a strong basis for doubt. If the balance of evidence shows Christianity to be authoritative, it would be unreasonable to reject it. For those who confess Christianity (affirming that “Jesus is Lord”), Jesus's view of the world must become their view of the world.
11. But Isn’t Christianity Based on Faith, Not Knowledge?

At this point, both believers and non-believers might have objections. Believers might say, “You’re missing the point of Christianity. It isn’t about facts. It’s about faith.” Non-believers could readily agree, “You Christians believe by faith; we non-Christians believe facts. Stop trying to tell us what to do.”

Steven Pinker, a professor at Harvard University, defines faith as “believing something without good reasons to do so.” But this is far too simplistic if not downright misleading. Certainly biblical faith is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8), and it involves trusting that God is who he says he is and will do all that he has promised to do. But biblical faith is based on knowledge, not blind obedience. Faith has its reasons. In Colossians 1:9–10 the Apostle Paul says, “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (emphasis added). The more we know, the better able we are to walk by faith.

Biblical faith is not blind. As we will see, the Bible is unique among books because it includes so many specific details, details that can be observed to be true or not true, that it is practically inviting scrutiny. The Apostles were confident not that their faith would be interesting to others but that it would be seen to be factual. In 1 Corinthians 15:19 the Apostle Paul told his readers, in essence, “You can check out the evidence for the resurrection of Christ for yourself. You’ll see that it actually happened. And if it didn’t happen, everything else I’m telling you is false.” Maybe it was based on the Apostle Peter’s own occasional doubting that he encouraged his readers to be prepared to give good reasons for the hope they placed in Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

What makes faith valid is not that we have it but that the object of our belief is actually worthy of belief. Theologian David Clark says, “Faith derives its value not from the intensity of the believer but from the genuineness of the one she believes in. True faith is faith in the right object; faith in an unfaithful person is worthless or worse.” It is not enough to be sincere in our belief. You can sincerely believe your parachute will deploy as you jump out of the plane over Central Park, but all of the sincerity in the world won’t help you if the parachute turns out to be an ordinary backpack.

So what do we do with doubt, then? All of us experience doubts because all of us are limited in our knowledge. We have questions for which we have not gotten satisfactory answers. But doubt can actually be a healthy part of a Christ-centered, thoughtful life. Here’s how Pastor Tim Keller says it:

A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the

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22 Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”
23 1 Peter 3:15, “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”
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probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person’s faith can collapse almost over-night if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.25

Dealing with doubt is part of what it means to mature in the faith. It takes courage to doubt. But here’s a hugely important key: rather than just give up, you should be specific about what bothers you, and you should gather the will to look for answers. Learn to doubt your doubts so they will not overpower ever thing else in your life.

12. COMING OF AGE IN THE WORLD OF IDEAS: WHY THIS BOOK IS IMPORTANT

Maybe it would be helpful if I illustrated this with some of my own story. My name is Jeff Myers. I grew up in a small town where everyone I knew was either Protestant or Catholic (or lapsed from one of the two). Other than the one classmate who was a Jehovah’s Witness, I was never confronted with other faiths in my town. I didn’t even meet a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist or a true atheist until I went to college. There, however, my world expanded and the choices stopped being simple.

Growing up I never imagined that I might be a scholar, mostly because I could barely understand what was going on in class, even in elementary school. My teachers’ instructions didn’t make sense to me, which led to poor grades and a lot of running laps in gym class. I could feel my heart pounding when they issued instructions because I knew I would forget or misunderstand them. My greatest fear was that I would not understand what people wanted from me, and that I would be punished, either by them or by life, as a result.

I did love to read, though, and even in the middle of the school day I would find myself turning out the teacher and reading a book about whatever I was interested in at the time. I didn’t necessarily learn what my teachers wanted me to learn, but I did enjoy learning about the topics I found interesting, such as philosophy and history.

Unfortunately, the more I learned about philosophy and history, the more at odds I felt with the faith of my parents. Our family attended a small conservative church. I remember one day the pastor gave a sermon on why women should wear dresses and not slacks or jeans. Why was this kind-hearted, well-meaning pastor taking so much time to answer questions like this, which were of no concern to my classmates and me, and ignoring questions like “Why does a good God allow pain and suffering?”

Fortunately, just after I graduated from high school, my father arranged for me to attend a two-week program in Colorado sponsored by the organization I now lead, Summit Ministries. Summit has been around for a long time—more than fifty years!—and was started by David Noebel.26 Noebel and the other instructors helped me acquire answers to my difficult questions about God, the world, and life’s purpose. It changed my life and led me into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

26 David A. Noebel is also the author of the original text, Understanding the Times, of which this current volume is a revision and update.
One of the most important gifts I received from Noebel was a mental model of worldviews. From this, he showed how the Christian worldview is more in tune with the way the world actually is than any other worldview we studied.

Summit gave me a vision for leadership. Noebel was the first to show me the reference to the tribe of Issachar from 1 Chronicles 12:32, who had an “understanding of the times” and “knew what Israel ought to do.” Notice the connection—because the men of this tiny tribe understood the times, they knew how to lead Israel. Learning this made me want to focus my life on understanding the times so I could make a difference during my lifetime.

Today I have the privilege of heading up that same ministry. Our mission hasn’t changed: to cultivate young leaders to transform culture with a biblical worldview. Our headquarters is in a collection of Victorian buildings in Manitou Springs, Colorado, a little town the New York Times has described as a “hippie Mayberry.”27 I live there with my family. I went to school nearby at the University of Denver, where I had some great professors and earned a Doctor of Philosophy in Human Communication Studies.

My goal for you is, first, that you will be a more thoughtful person when it comes to understanding the ideas that rule our world. But more than that, I want you to experience confidence in God and in the Bible such that you are motivated to be a courageous, articulate, compassionate, completely sold-out follower of Jesus Christ who applies your faith to every area of life.

Summit Ministries continues the great tradition of cultivating rising generations to know the truth and to lead. Its instructors are world-class experts committed to living godly lives, communicating vibrantly, dialoguing, and mentoring others. They don’t desire to impress people with how smart they are but to prepare purposeful, resolute, articulate, and compassionate champions of the Christian worldview. Simply put, Summit helps high school and college students learn what they need to know so that they might become our nation’s most trusted leaders.

My goal for you is, first, that you will be a more thoughtful person when it comes to understanding the ideas that rule our world. But more than that, I want you to experience confidence in God and in the Bible such that you are motivated to be a courageous, articulate, compassionate, completely sold-out follower of Jesus Christ who applies your faith to every area of life.

13. Introduction to the Book Series

There are three books in this series:

- **Vol 1: Understanding the Faith: A Survey of Christian Apologetics.** We’ll explore the nature of God, what the Bible is all about, and how to answer the common challenges people pose in attempting to refute Christianity. Along the way, we hope you come not only to understand the importance of the Bible intellectually but to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

- **Vol 2: Understanding the Times: A Survey of Competing Worldviews.** We’ll examine the Christian worldview against five other worldviews that all want their truth claims to be believed in Christianity’s place. We’ll also learn to respond to those challenges in ten academic areas that most students will be faced with in college—and in life.

• **Vol 3: Understanding the Culture: A Survey of Contemporary Challenges.** We’ll learn how to be intelligent, thoughtful Christians living in today’s world. We will explore some of the most difficult issues of our day and apply to them our understandings of God, his revelation, and our insights into the other worldviews.

For most people, this series of books will serve as a clear, comprehensive, and compelling case for Christianity, which is good in itself. But if you’re the kind of person who craves a sense of purpose, who longs for a noble cause, who has sensed that most people move through their lives unaware, then this series will mean so much more: it will be an essential part of your journey to becoming a champion for truth.

The search for truth is not one we should fear. As Thomas Jefferson said, “Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate.”

We’re going to have plenty of debate and discussion. We approach each question honestly, deal with the doubts many experience while courageously doubting those doubts, and always move toward the truth.

### 14. The Benefits of Understanding the Times

By picking up this book and committing to study it, you join a long line of tens of thousands of leaders in business, politics, medicine, science, ministry, the arts, and dozens of other cultural channels of influence who have committed to knowing the facts and truths about Christianity; their beliefs have become stronger, their values deeper, their convictions more firm, and their actions more likely to take them in the direction they should go.

At Summit we’ve uncovered some convincing findings about why all this matters.

- Today’s Christian young adults are unprepared for opposition. Only one out of six students understands the worldviews that set themselves up against the knowledge of God (Colossians 2:8).
- Today’s Christian young adults cannot mount a defense. While more than two out of three students are confident that the Christian worldview is true, only one in five feels prepared to defend it as such.
- Today’s Christian young adults are failing at spiritual disciplines. Only one in three students claims to have a strong devotional or prayer life.
- Today’s Christian young adults feel alienated from God. Imagine a youth group meeting at church: only one in two students assembled there actually feels close to God.

Training in understanding the times truly moves the needle, so to speak. An in-depth study of 1,591 students who studied with Summit shows “worldview training” has a dramatic positive influence on their level of Christian commitment, feeling of closeness to God, devotional life, prayer life, church attendance, sharing of faith, understanding of a Christian worldview,

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29 Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

30 This and many of the following findings are discussed at length in *Turning the Tide: Evidence of Impact*, a white paper produced by Summit Ministries, accessed February 27, 2015, www.turningthetide.net.
understanding of other worldviews, confidence in the truth of a Christian worldview, ability to explain their beliefs, and ability to defend those beliefs under challenge. In fact, the average respondent says he or she is 85 percent better prepared—almost twice as prepared—for higher education.

This is great news for a struggling generation. Of today’s young people in America, ages twelve to twenty-two, only one in five possesses a sense of purpose in life while twenty-five percent are at risk of not achieving productive adulthood. Young Christians are disengaging from their faith, embracing instead what sociologist Christian Smith calls “liberal whateverism.” Yet fully 60 percent say they want to make a difference. They just need guidance.

Let’s get ready to embark on a journey through the world of ideas. At points it may be rough going. Don’t give up! We may realize along the way that all is not well. I’m fine with that as long as it motivates us to do something. C. S. Lewis observed, “If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.” The study of ideas isn’t just to find what “works for me.” It’s about expressing the truth publicly and persuasively. It’s about leadership.

15. FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

For most of my life I wished I lived in a Lord of the Rings moment, an age of defining battles and a clear difference between good and evil. Our world might not seem to be so clearly divided, but we do live in an epic time. What we do now will affect the world for hundreds of years, for evil as well as for good. In a world of change, small things often become great in consequence. Karl Marx, notorious founder of the world’s most bloody, miserable worldview, did most of his work alone in a quiet library. When Marx died, only a handful attended his funeral. And still, as Dave Breese memorably phrased it, his ideas “rule the world from the grave.”

The battle of our time isn’t just a battle for territory or power. It’s a battle for truth. It is your destiny to battle for truth against lies, for justice against injustice, and for good against evil. This is no accident in God’s sovereign plan. It is time for us to be brave and stand up. C. S. Lewis says that Christians “are tempted to make unnecessary concessions to those outside the Faith.” We give in too much, he says. “We must show our Christian colours, if we are to be true to Jesus Christ. We cannot remain silent and concede everything away.”

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36 Dave Breese, Seven Men Who Raze the World from the Grave (Chicago: Moody, 1989), chaps 4 & 5.
37 C. S. Lewis, God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 262.
Of course, the need to understand the times as Christians does not mean we know everything. I have to confess, my greatest fear in writing this book is that if people read it and disagree with any given point, the dialogue between us will break down. Too often, Christians succumb to what Russell Kirk called the “excommunication temptation,” a belief that we all must agree on everything or else there is no truth and that those who “disagree with me” must be shunned. What we're shooting for in this book is what C. S. Lewis called mere Christianity—agreement on the non-negotiable basics of the faith while exercising charity in the areas where we disagree. For my part, I'll try to outline my assumptions and thinking as clearly as possible as well as what I understand to be the biblical basics. As you read, I encourage you to think carefully and discern how we can move forward together even where we disagree.

Several millennia ago a young Jewish woman named Esther was pushed into marrying King Xerxes, one of the most cruel and pompous kings of ancient history. Sometime afterward, Esther’s uncle Mordecai uncovered a plot, hatched by one of the king’s trusted advisors, to massacre the Jewish people. Mordecai urged Esther to intercede with the king. She informed him that the king, in his paranoia, would have anyone killed who came into his presence without invitation—including, presumably, his own queen. But Mordecai pressed her to act by saying, “Who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). Perhaps we too have come to a royal position for such a time as this.

16. Conclusion

We’ll get started in the next chapter by examining what the Bible is and isn’t. This is sure to be controversial. The Bible has been the most influential book in the history of the world, and it’s not because—as some would claim—it is a love story from God, an instruction manual for life, a book of dos and don’ts, or even a book about admirable heroes. It is something much, much more. Interestingly, some famous skeptics and atheists have understood this even better than many Christians.

So get ready to think hard, because the following chapters will engage you at the intellectual level. More than that, though, be ready to wonder. This book will engage you at the level of imagination as well: life is an art, not a science. If God is real and the Bible is authoritative, then truth is real and there is a sure way in which we should walk. We should be prepared to follow it.

CHAPTER 2
1. What The Bible Is Really All About

The Bible is the best-selling book in the world. It is printed, in part or in whole, in 2,800 languages worldwide.\(^1\) On average, 85 percent of U.S. households own a Bible; the average number of Bibles per household is 4.3.\(^2\) Unfortunately, while the Bible is widely owned, it goes largely unstudied.

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• Barely one-quarter of adults (27 percent) are confident that Satan exists, even though this is a key teaching of the Bible and something Jesus taught.  

• 47 percent of American Christians strongly agree or agree somewhat that the Book of Mormon, the Quran, and the Bible all express the same spiritual truths.  

• 69 percent believe they are knowledgeable about the Bible, but 58 percent were unable to correctly identify the first five books of the Bible.  

• 45 percent of adults in the United States strongly—but erroneously—believe that the Bible teaches God helps those who help themselves.  

• 60 percent of Americans can’t name five of the Ten Commandments.  

• Only 52 percent of young adults knew it was false to say that “Sodom and Gomorrah were married.”  

• 50 percent of Americans, including Christians, can’t name any of the four Gospels.  

On average, 85 percent of U.S. households own a Bible; the average number of Bibles per household is 4.3. Unfortunately, while the Bible is widely owned, it goes largely unstudied.

The United States may be one of the most religious nations in the West, but the American people are quite ignorant of things they ought to know about religion.

If the majority of Christians don’t know what the Bible says, we can be sure they also don’t realize what the Bible is for. “It’s a rule book,” some say. “It’s a love letter,” we’ve heard, “from God just to us.”

However, the Bible doesn’t look like a rule book, an instruction manual, or a love letter. It looks like something else altogether. Recognizing what the Bible is will affect how we read it and whether we understand it. The introduction to The Jesus Storybook Bible, a children’s book written by author Sally Lloyd-Jones prosaically sets forth what the Bible is really all about.

God wrote, “I love you”—he wrote it in the sky, and on the earth, and under the sea. He wrote his message everywhere! Because God created everything in his world to reflect him like a mirror—to show us what he is like, to help us know him, to make our hearts sing. . . .

And God put it into words, too, and wrote it in a book called “the Bible.”

Now, some people think the Bible is a book of rules, telling you what you should and shouldn’t do. The Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best. But the Bible isn’t mainly about you and what you should be doing. It’s about God and what he has done.


5 Ibid.  

6 Ibid.  


Recognizing what the Bible is will affect how we read it and whether we understand it.

Other people think the Bible is a book of heroes, showing you people you should copy. The Bible does have some heroes in it, but (as you’ll soon find out) most of the people in the Bible aren’t heroes at all. They make some big mistakes (sometimes on purpose). They get afraid and run away. At times they are downright mean.

No, the Bible isn’t a book of rules, or a book of heroes. The Bible is most of all a Story. It’s an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It’s a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne—everything—to rescue the one he loves. It’s like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life!

You see, the best thing about this Story is—it’s true.

There are lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big Story. The Story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them.

It takes the whole Bible to tell this Story. And at the center of the Story, there is a baby. Every Story in the Bible whispers his name. He is like the missing piece in a puzzle—the piece that makes all the other pieces fit together, and suddenly you can see a beautiful picture.¹¹

Of course, Lloyd-Jones’s account does not include information on all of the Bible’s doctrines. But if her telling of it is correct, then being ignorant of or misunderstanding the Bible is to miss the whole point of life itself! Perhaps we should recall the words of Jesus, who said, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

There was a time when the Bible’s influence was widespread, and everyone in the West was better off for it. It’s a fascinating story and one most people—even long-time believers—will find amazing. In this chapter we’ll explore this story. We’ll discover what the Bible is and is not. Along the way we’ll take a look at concepts such as revelation, knowledge, and truth that can help us grasp the place of the Bible in our lives. Hopefully, if we’re willing, we will recover an understanding of why and how this one book—the Bible—changed the world.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BIBLE IN HISTORY

In his visit to America in the 1830s, French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville discovered that “America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men’s souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to man, since the country where it now has widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest.”¹² If this was so, it was intentional. Here’s what some of America’s founders said about the Bible and Christianity:

- John Jay called the Bible the “best of Books” and told his daughter, “Do not omit reading in it daily; in it you will find the best rules for your Conduct in this life and the most elevated hopes for futurity.”¹³

¹¹ Sally Lloyd-Jones, The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name (Grand Rapids: ZonderKids, 2007), 12–17.
• Samuel Adams: “The Rights of the Colonists as Christians may be best understood by reading and carefully studying the institutes of the great Law Giver and Head of the Christian Church, which are to be found clearly written and promulgated in the New Testament.”

• Noah Webster: “All of the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from them despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible.”

• Benjamin Rush: “The Bible contains more knowledge necessary to man in his present state than any other book in the world.”

A remarkable number of U.S. presidents through history have concurred.

• John Adams: “The Bible is the best book in the world.”

• John Quincy Adams: “No book in the world deserves to be so unceasingly studied and so profoundly meditated upon as the Bible.”

• Abraham Lincoln: “The Bible is the best gift God has given to men. All the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it, we could not know right from wrong.”

• Theodore Roosevelt: “The teachings of the Bible are so interwoven and entwined with our whole civic and social life that it would be literally—I do not mean figuratively, I mean literally—impossible for us to figure to ourselves what that life would be if these teachings were removed.”

• Woodrow Wilson: “The Bible is the one supreme source of revelation of the meaning of life, the nature of God, and spiritual nature and needs of men. It is the only guide of life which really leads the spirit in the way of peace and salvation.”

• Calvin Coolidge: “The strength of our country is the strength of its religious convictions. The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible, that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country.”

• Franklin Roosevelt: “We cannot read the history of our rise and development as a nation without reckoning with the place the Bible has occupied in shaping the advances of the Republic. I suggest a nationwide reading of the Holy Scriptures.”

• Harry Truman: “The fundamental basis of this Nation’s law was given to Moses on the Mount. The fundamental basis of our Bill of Rights comes from the teachings which we get from Exodus and St. Matthew, from Isaiah and St. Paul. I don’t think we emphasize that enough these days.”


17 John Quincy Adams, Letters by John Quincy Adams to His Son on the Bible and Its Teachings (Auburn, ME: James A. Alden, 1850), 119.


Ronald Reagan: “Of the many influences that have shaped the United States of America into a distinctive Nation and people, none may be said to be more fundamental and enduring than the Bible.”

Of course, not all of these men were what we would today call “evangelical Christians.” Even so, the significance of the Bible to their way of thinking was so important that America’s first English-language Bible included a recommendation by the United States Congress: “Resolved that the United States in Congress assembled . . . recommend this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States.” Clearly, America’s founders saw the Bible as essential to the basis of a free society.

The preservation of freedom was only one of many reasons for studying the Bible. In his lecture “Why Should We Study the Bible?” Summit Ministries’s founder, David A. Noebel, offers compelling reasons for why everyone should take the Bible seriously. Here are four of his key points:

1. **The Bible is part of world literature.** There are more quotations in *Bartlett’s Book of Quotations* from the Bible than from any other source. Even atheist Richard Dawkins, who abhors the Bible as a source of morality, wrote a startling editorial proclaiming that all children should read the Bible. Dawkins said, “A native speaker of English who has never read a word of the King James Bible is verging on the barbarian.”

2. **The Bible changed Western civilization.** Alvin Schmidt’s *How Christianity Changed the World* says the Bible’s moral guidance influenced everything, including the abolition of slavery, the banning of child molestation, freedom and dignity for women, the formation of hospitals and schools, the securing of liberty and justice for all, the advance of science, the development of great art and architecture, and the sanctity of human life.

3. **Knowledge of the Bible is the mark of an educated person.** William Lyon Phelps, a Yale professor for forty-one years, wrote in *Human Nature in the Bible*, “Everyone who has a thorough knowledge of the Bible may truly be called educated; and no other learning or culture, no matter how extensive or elegant, can, among Europeans and Americans, form a proper substitute. . . . I believe a knowledge of the Bible without a college education is more valuable than a college course without the Bible.”

4. **Knowledge of the Bible is the mark of a moral person.** To live successfully in this world, a person must be able to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, and choose to do what is right and good. The famous Golden Rule of morality, “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you,” comes directly from the Bible (see Matthew 7:12 and also Mark 12:29–31, in which Jesus references the Old Testament passages.

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of Exodus 3:6, Deuteronomy 6:4–5, and Leviticus 19:18). Even famed British atheist Bertrand Russell understood the principle when he said, “What the world needs is Christian love or compassion.”

So knowing the Bible is important. But exactly how do we come to know it?

3. The Bible’s Unique Call to Study

As Noebel points out, every worldview has a “Bible,” a book of what we consider to be revealed truth. Muslims have the Quran, Secular Humanists have The Humanist Manifesto, Libertarians have Atlas Shrugged, Marxists have The Communist Manifesto, Hindus have the Bhagavad Gita. Among all others, the Bible is unique in its tremendous influence.

We come to know the Bible through careful study. The Apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Later in the same letter he affirmed his own careful study with a request: “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:13). Even though Paul was an old man approaching his death, he intended to continue studying Scripture to his dying day.

Scripture encourages its readers to be deeply familiar with the Scriptures (Psalm 119) and to not distort them (2 Peter 3:16). It applauds those who compared the Apostle Paul’s teachings to the Old Testament to see if they were true (Acts 17:1–4). It is extraordinarily rare for a holy book to call for careful, rational examination of its own teachings to see if they are consistent with revealed truth. Nothing in the Quran, for example, says, “Check this out for yourself, to see if the Prophet Mohammad was correct,” or “Study this to see if it is consistent with the rest of the Quran.” In fact, Mohammad himself was told to consult the “people of the Book” (Christians and Jews) if he doubted that the message he was receiving from the angel Gabriel was correct. Why? Because Christians and Jews had diligently studied the Bible (though, the Quran claims, to little effect). As for itself, the message of the Quran is much like the books of other religious worldviews: “Here it is, take it or leave it.”

30 Matthew 7:12, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”; Mark 12:29–31, “Jesus answered. The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”; Exodus 3:6, “And he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”; Deuteronomy 6:4–5, “‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’”; Leviticus 19:18, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”


32 2 Peter 3:16, “As he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”

33 Acts 17:1–4, “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”


35 See, for example, Quran, Sura 2:40–44 and 2:121.

36 See the Quran, Sura 2 in its entirety for insight into how the Quran is to be believed and not questioned.
In addition to calling for careful examination, the Bible promises several benefits to believers who engage in such study.

1. **Blessing:** Psalm 119 indicates that those who study Scripture will be blessed with delight, freedom from shame, wisdom, hope, and protection against doing evil.

2. **Insight into how to bear spiritual fruit:** “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22–34).

3. **Freedom from spiritual bondage:** Understanding God is the basis of freedom. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. . . . But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 3:17–4:2).

4. **Direction in life:** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6).

5. **The ability to grasp truth and defeat error:** “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; see also Ephesians 6:10–19).

Why does the Bible call for careful examination, and how is it possible that such examination will lead to a profound sense of freedom and direction in life? To answer these questions, we must have a clear understanding of the concept of revelation. In order to grasp the concept of revelation, though, we must first dispose of the common myth that the Bible is an “instruction manual” for life.

### 4. Not Merely a Book of Instructions

A common acronym from the 1990s said that the Bible stands for “‘Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.’ To this view, the Bible’s value is that of a check-list. When my sons were small we enjoyed assembling Legos sets. Just follow the pictures, snap the right pieces together in the correct order, and you’ll end up with an airplane, a ship, or an epic scene from the *Lord of the Rings*.

What makes Legos instruction manuals valuable is their simplicity. Each instruction is stated propositionally, as a command: “Do this next.” As long as you follow each step correctly and in the right order, everything works out. There is no depth, no explanation of why things work as they do, no higher-level thinking skills required, and no connection to anything else in life.

But the Bible, the whole Bible, complete with stories and poems and wisdom and prophecy—not just rules—is not even primarily about us at all. It is about God and what he has done, is doing, and will do in the world and for all eternity. It is from God and for humans. Studying it orients us to the world God both created and redeemed.

Theologian N. T. Wright puts it this way:
Reading scripture, like praying and sharing in the sacraments, is one of the means by which the life of heaven and the life of earth interlock. (This is what older writers were referring to when they spoke of “the means of grace.” It isn’t that we can control God’s grace, but that there are, so to speak, places to go where God has promised to meet with his people, even if sometimes when we turn up it feels as though God has forgotten the date. More usually it’s the other way around.) We read scripture in order to hear God addressing us—us, here and now, today.\(^\text{37}\)

It makes very little sense to study the Bible over and over again if it is just a book of rules. Can you imagine a long-time driver dedicating time every day to studying the Driver’s Education Manual? Can you imagine an employee sitting down daily with a cup of coffee and his employment manual? If, however, the Bible is a compass, it will direct us to the right path on our daily journey. It will guide us toward a relationship with God and purpose in his kingdom, correcting us when we stray.

The compass analogy is important to me as one who has led many expeditions into the Colorado wilderness. With a compass and a topographical map, it is possible to find the way through any wilderness area. Without the compass, the map is of little use. All the mountains, trees, and streams become obstacles rather than landmarks.

A compass does its job by showing you magnetic north. It doesn’t point to you. It doesn’t seek to validate your direction. It just shows the fixed, unchanging truth. It offers a reference point outside of you. Deviating from it, even a little, means that the longer you travel, the more lost you’ll be. The same is true with the Bible. Theologian Robert L. Plummer notes, “The person who reads Scripture and does not obey it is self-deceived (James 1:22). To claim to know God while consistently and consciously disobeying his Word is to demonstrate the falseness of one’s claim.”\(^\text{38}\)

Therefore, the Bible-as-compass analogy helps us see God’s Word less as a to-do list and more as a guide to wise living, which is important in this fallen world where beauty and ugliness, safety and danger exist side by side.

On a recent ski trip my son and I found ourselves at the top of the mountain in extreme terrain and taking in the spectacular vista. Above and behind us, though, we could see snow cliffs eroding in the unseasonably warm afternoon. Of course, they looked awesome, but experience in the mountains told us they were nonetheless unstable and might quickly collapse, triggering an avalanche. We found a safe area as quickly as we could. Wisdom about mountain conditions enabled us to both enjoy the view and take measures to protect our safety.

But perhaps you’re wondering why we should trust the Bible as life’s compass. Many religions and philosophies offer direction. Why not trust one of those instead?

This question brings us to a significant point in this book: Christianity is a revealed religion. It claims the existence of a God who not only exists but alone has the authority to speak into our lives. If the Bible’s revelation about God is accurate, then what it says is authoritative. This is serious and warrants a closer look at the idea of revelation, what it means to know something, what is true, and how we might be confident that the Bible is indeed God’s Word.

\(^{38}\) Robert Lewis Plummer, 40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 99.
5. What Does It Mean to Call the Bible “Revelation”?

Revelation means to make known something that was previously unknown. The Hebrew word (galah) and the Greek word (apokalypto) “express the idea of uncovering what was concealed.”

Gordon R. Lewis writes, “Revelation is an activity of the invisible, living God making known to finite and sinful people His creative power, moral standards, and gracious redemptive plan.”

There are really only two options when it comes to the origins of religion—revelation or evolution. Either God exists and has spoken and is discovered by humanity, or religion and religious texts are invented (not revealed) and therefore our concepts of the divine evolve over time.

Christianity claims that an infinite yet personal God exists and that he has spoken. He wants to be known. Erik Thoennes says,

Knowing God is the most important thing in life. God created people fundamentally for relationship with himself. This relationship depends on knowing who he is as he has revealed himself. God is personal, which means he has a mind, will, emotions, relational ability, and self-consciousness. Because he is personal, and not merely an impersonal object, God must personally reveal himself to us.

This is clear from the very first book of the Bible: “And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion’” (Genesis 1:26, emphasis mine). He didn’t talk at our first parents—he spoke to them in a way they could understand. New Testament scholar D. A. Carson puts it this way:

God is a talking God. . . . He speaks to them. So the God of the Bible in the very first chapter [of Genesis] is not some abstract “unmoved mover,” some spirit impossible to define, some ground of all beings, some mystical experience. He has a personality and dares to disclose himself in words that human beings understand. Right through the whole Bible, that picture of God constantly recurs. However great or transcendent he is, he is a talking God.

There in the garden of Eden, the man and woman knew exactly what to do not because he sent word but because he was with them.

6. That All May Know: Two Ways God Reveals His Nature and Character

Would people be able to know about God even if they did not have the Bible? To a certain extent, yes. There are many aspects of his character they would not understand, but through his creation many things about him would be clear. Psalm 19:1–4 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, which brought Bible-based reform to prisons all over the world, described in his book Born Again a particular experience he had as a Marine captain leading a battalion to quell a communist rebellion in Guatemala. Shortly before the action commenced, Colson stood apprehensively on the deck of his ship staring at the stars.

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39 Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 201.
41 Erik Thoennes, Life’s Biggest Questions: What the Bible Says about the Things That Matter Most (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 41-42.
That night I suddenly became as certain as I had ever been about anything in my life that out there in that great starlit beyond was God. I was convinced that He ruled over the universe, that to Him there were no mysteries, that He somehow kept it all miraculously in order. In my own fumbling way, I prayed, knowing that He was there, questioning only whether He had time to hear me.\textsuperscript{33}

Colson did not enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ at that moment, but his recognition of God’s creation laid a foundation on which God would build, through godly mentors and twenty years in the future, to make himself completely known.

This kind of revelation (i.e., God showing himself in creation, revealing his existence to our hearts), is called \textit{general revelation}. Bruce Demarest describes the content of what can be known through general revelation: “While not imparting truths necessary for salvation—such as the Trinity, the incarnation, or the atonement—general revelation conveys the conviction that God exists and that he is transcendent, immanent, self-sufficient, eternal, powerful, good and a hater of evil.”\textsuperscript{44}

Like the unveiling of a famous painting, general revelation is a silent unveiling in which God’s work speaks for itself. As I write this, an exhibit of Dutch Golden Age paintings is making its way across the United States for the first time in at least three decades. The most anticipated piece is probably Johannes Vermeer’s \textit{The Girl with the Pearl Earring}. Imagine the scene as the opening night crowd gathers, and the curator parts the curtain, revealing Vermeer’s beloved work to many who are seeing it in person for the first time. A few people murmur their approval, but no one says a word. There is no need. This is the actual painting, the one Vermeer personally labored over almost four hundred years ago. Nothing of the moment is lost on the crowd: this is the real thing, and everyone knows it.

Because God’s general revelation is clear, ignorance of reality is no excuse. Romans 1:19–20 says, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

General revelation is written on our hearts as well as in our observation of creation. Later in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes,

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14–16)

But general revelation reveals God’s work only in its broadest strokes. The finer details about what we need to be united with God in Christ fit into what theologians call \textit{special revelation}. Millard J. Erickson says, “By special revelation we mean God’s manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship

with him.” Scripture speaks of this in Hebrews 1:1–2 which says, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”

A few years ago I was privileged to attend an advanced screening of a movie called Amazing Grace, the story of William Wilberforce’s battle to end the British slave trade. The director, writer, and producer were all on hand to introduce the movie and answer questions. The movie spoke for itself, but having the filmmakers present enabled us to receive special insight into how the movie was made, why it was made, and how we could help spread the word about the film.

Similarly, when we call Christianity a revealed religion, we are pointing out something more than the general existence of a creator God. We are proclaiming God’s special revelation through the Bible—like having spoken to the movie director himself!—which is knowable and true and thus has a legitimate claim to authority over our lives. As N. T. Wright puts it, “The authority of Scripture is the authority of God exercised through Scripture.” Most important, the Bible is essential to knowing God truly through Jesus Christ. All of this is involved when we say the Bible is God’s Word, but what exactly this means and how we know it to be true requires closer examination.

7. What Does It Mean to Say the Bible Is “the Word of God”? What exactly does it mean to say the Bible contains God’s word? As you investigate the evidence, you will discover, as my friend Jonathan Morrow put it, that “The Bible did not magically fall from heaven leather bound; its composition was a divine and human process consistent with the natural limitations associated with writing documents in the ancient world.”

So when we say the Bible is the revealed Word of God, we’re making several claims.

• There is an external world that can be known.
• Truth about this world can be discovered.
• The Bible describes this world objectively, as it is for everyone.
• The Bible is the kind of document making claims that open themselves up for scrutiny and can thus be examined for truth.

Christians need to be prepared to understand and defend the Bible’s “true truth” and not just how they feel about it. As Nancy Pearcey phrases it, “When Christians are willing to reduce religion to noncognitive [feelings rather than thoughts] categories, unconnected to questions of truth or evidence, then we have already lost the battle.”

There is a growing confusion over what people mean when they say the Bible is God’s Word. Some people say the Bible contains God’s word, which is a very different thing from saying it is God’s Word. To say that the Bible merely contains God’s Word implies that it contains some other things too—but who is to decide which parts of the Bible contain God’s Word and which do not?

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45 Erickson, Christian Theology, 201.


Claiming the Bible contains God’s Word places the decision in human hands—God’s Word is what we say it is. Presumably, for people who hold this view, the Bible is God’s Word only insofar as it rings true in our experience. Bluntly put, the compass of the Bible is only God’s Word if it points to us. This is contrary to the whole point of biblical revelation. The traditional, historical argument for the Bible being God’s Word acknowledges that the Bible’s words ring true, but it clearly asserts that even if they didn’t, the Bible itself is still true.

Here are some reasons to be confident that the Bible is God’s Word: The Bible is rooted in history and has been accurately transmitted. The Bible isn’t just a random holy book proceeding from the imagination of a spiritual person. It is based on actual events in history. As philosopher William Lane Craig says,

Christianity . . . is rooted in real events of history. To some people this is scandalous because it means that the truth of Christianity is inexplicably bound up with the truth of certain historical facts, such that if those facts should be disproved, so would Christianity. But at the same time, this makes Christianity unique because, unlike most other world religions, we now have a means of verifying its truth by historical evidence.\(^{49}\)

From the beginning, those charged with transmitting God’s Word through time sensed the need to conduct their work with great care. As we will see, the more that archeologists examine the Bible’s historical evidence, the more confirmation they find of its accuracy. The meticulous care with which scribes copied the text was seen in a special way with the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave a Qumran, in Israel. Among the documents was a stunning scroll containing nearly the complete text of the book of Isaiah nearly one thousand years older than the next oldest copy. In spite of the hundreds of times it must have been copied, between the old and the newer versions there was a variation of less than 5 percent, most of which was spelling variations.\(^{50}\) This is no secret; the amazing Isaiah scroll may be seen today at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The accuracy of the New Testament is similarly demonstrated by manuscript evidence, the presence of early texts, the number of witnesses testifying to its truth, and archeological discoveries confirming what the text actually says.\(^{51}\) We’ll look at some of this evidence in greater detail in coming chapters.

The Bible is inspired by God. Theologian David Clark says we must distinguish between our recognition of the Bible’s authority and its inherent possession of authority. If we start by recognizing the Bible’s truth and admit that our recognition is not what makes it true, we can respond with full confidence to the way its truths resonate in our lives. As Clark says, “The objective authority of the Bible rooted in God’s inspiring action stands against allowing any contemporary agendas to gain control over the theology. The subjective recognition of the Bible as authoritative guards against a dead orthodoxy that pays lip service to divine truth even as it pursues other agendas.”\(^{52}\) In this statement, Clark uses the term “inspiring” not as a synonym for “motivational” but in its literal meaning:

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51 Morrow, Welcome to College, 88.
“to breathe.” It is a reference to the Greek word pneuma used in 2 Timothy 3:16, which says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

There is also much confusion about what theologians mean when they talk about the inspiration of Scripture, and I certainly do not expect to settle the matter with a few brief comments. At the very least, to say that God inspired the Bible means, according to Gordon Lewis, that “the Holy Spirit supernaturally motivated and superintended the prophetic and apostolic recipients of revelation in the entire process of writing their scriptural books.”

Second Peter 1:20–21 says, “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In fact, over three thousand times the writers of the Bible claim to have received messages by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the authors of the books of the Bible clearly believed they were led by God’s Spirit to write what they did. The Holy Spirit breathed into (the literal meaning of “inspired”) God’s intentions into their minds and hearts so that what they wrote accurately displayed his nature and character.

The product of the Holy Spirit’s work is stunning—one completely coherent book made up of sixty-six separate books written over the course of 1,500 years by forty different writers. Some were kings and philosophers, yes, but others were fishermen and tentmakers. As Robert Saucy put it, “They lived in diverse cultures, and wrote in a variety of literary styles. But the message of the Bible is one great drama in which all of the parts fit together.”

The Bible is inerrant. Many theologians go beyond inspiration to say the Bible is inerrant—that is, without error. Theologian Carl F. H. Henry makes an extended argument about inerrancy in his six-volume work God, Revelation and Authority explaining that God used the writers to communicate exactly what he wanted and yet did so without overriding their personalities. And since God cannot lie, the Bible is accurate in the original writings.

Is this a reasonable claim? Yes, as long as we clearly understand what we mean by inerrancy. David Dockery explains it as follows: “When all the facts are known, the Bible (in its original writings) properly interpreted in light of which culture and communication means had developed by the time of its composition will be shown to be completely true (and therefore not false) in all that it affirms, to the degree of precision intended by the author, in all matters relating to God and his creation.” If a personal, infinite God exists, such a God could inspire writers to say what he wants them to say.

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53 The Apologetics Study Bible, 1812.
54 Ibid.
56 Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority.
58 The term “personal-infinite” comes from Francis Schaeffer in He Is There and He Is Not Silent (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1972).
Here is another way of arriving at an understanding of Scripture’s reliability. The text of the New Testament has been reliably transmitted and, as we will see, passes the test of being reliable in the historical information it provides. In these writings, Jesus’s claims and deeds present him as the incarnation of God. Because Jesus endorses the divine authority of the Old Testament and authorized the apostles to carry on his ministry and preserve his teachings, we can have confidence in all sixty-six books of the Bible.  

This does not mean that there have been no errors in transmitting the text through time. But we can say that the essential doctrines of the faith have been transmitted reliably and that the best translations today will not mislead us on anything to which they speak.

The doctrine of inerrancy says that the truth of the Bible does not depend on how we understand it, on the skill of the people who translated it from one language to another, or even on the care with which various people transmitted its words through time. It depends entirely on the truth of God’s revelation.

But is this truth something we human beings can actually know?

8. Does Biblical Revelation Lead to True Knowledge?

To speak of knowing the truth about God, we must first define both knowledge and truth. Knowledge is justified true belief. It isn’t enough to believe. We must believe that our beliefs are true, and we must be justified in holding that belief. Morrow explains the definition of knowledge this way: "For something to count as knowledge, (1) you must believe it; (2) the belief you hold must be true (that is, it accurately describes the way things actually are); and (3) this true belief must be justified or supported by adequate evidence based on thought and experience."

The Bible assumes that true belief is possible and justified. In fact, a medical doctor named Luke mentioned this exact thing in the account we know today as the “Gospel of Luke.”

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

Luke’s testimony wasn’t based on wishes or strong feelings but on a careful investigation that included interviews with eyewitnesses. Knowledge led to truth, which in turn led to confidence. Similarly, the Apostle John wrote, “And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” (1 John 5:11).

Knowledge is vitally important. As we saw in chapter 1, the lack of it destroys people (Hosea 4:6). Philosopher Dallas Willard explains, “People perish for lack of knowledge, because only knowledge permits assured access to reality; and reality does not adjust itself to accommodate our false beliefs, errors, or hesitations in action. Life demands a steady hand for good, and only

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60 In addition to Groothuis, Christian Apologetics, see also John R. Stott, The Authority of the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974).
62 Hosea 4:6, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.”
knowledge supplies this. This is as true in the spiritual life as elsewhere.\textsuperscript{63} The analogy is an important one. The captain of a sailing vessel must have a steady hand, provided by knowledge of the seas and of his craft, to navigate safely to the proper destination. Lack of knowledge, then, is disastrous. Theologian J. I. Packer agrees:

We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life, blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.\textsuperscript{64}

In the absence of knowledge we are lost, and being lost terrorizes us. Going through life lost turns what might otherwise be beautiful and meaningful into an experience of progressive horror and chaos.

No one relishes the idea of being lost in the cosmos, but where they turn for knowledge depends on what they believe about the nature and character of God. As we will see, many people are “naturalists.” They believe that everything that happens has a natural cause and explanation. There is no supernatural revelation. We're on our own for guidance.

But is naturalism a plausible theory about how knowledge develops? If naturalism is true, then everything that has ever happened or occurs now—including our cognitive abilities—must be explained through natural processes, such as evolution. However, according to philosopher Alvin Plantinga, one of the most respected philosophers of the twentieth century, naturalism and evolution do not provide a sufficient basis for knowledge. Plantinga's reasoning is as follows. Evolution selects the fittest organisms. It doesn't select for truth because it is interested only in survival, and truth is not necessary for survival. It is possible that false beliefs enable survival as much as true ones, as with, for example, a group of witches who become better fitted for survival because they treat every threat as something that might hold magical powers over them, and thus avoid everything that might kill them. Evolution might allow these witches to flourish, but it doesn't deliver true beliefs about the world.

Though evolution may give us faculties that help us survive, there is no guarantee that those faculties deliver truth. In other words, if everything that has come about has occurred through natural processes, then there is no good reason to believe we have received true ideas about the world. In fact, we have no good reason to believe naturalism itself is actually true. Actually, we have good reason to doubt it because, as Plantinga phrases it, “if naturalism and evolution were both true, our cognitive faculties would very likely not be reliable.”\textsuperscript{65}

As opposed to naturalism, Christian theism says that a rational God created us to be knowers. “God has endowed humans with a structure of rationality patterned after the ideas of His own mind: we can know truth because God has made us like himself [i.e., in his image],” philosopher Ronald Nash says.\textsuperscript{66} Not only do we bear God’s image as knowers, Nash says, but we do so through

\begin{itemize}
  \item Though evolution may give us faculties that help us survive, there is no guarantee that those faculties deliver truth.
  \item A rational God created us to be knowers.
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\textsuperscript{63} Dallas Willard, Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 39.
\textsuperscript{64} J. I. Packer, Knowing God, 20th anniv. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 19.
communication as well: “Language is a divinely given gift to facilitate communion between God and humans that is both personal and cognitive.”

When we say we’re searching for knowledge, what we’re actually looking for is “adequate reasons” for our beliefs. Some kinds of knowledge require more and better reasons than others. If I want to go skiing, I can look online for snow reports at the various ski resorts. Making a wrong choice usually isn’t a big deal. After all, for those who like to ski, a bad day of skiing is better than a good day doing most other things.

When it comes to something like deciding which church to join, however, we need a much deeper level of knowledge. We need to study the church’s doctrine, interview the pastor, and discern whether it is the kind of place in which we can serve effectively. If we make a thoughtless choice, we risk becoming dissatisfied and a source of discouragement to others in the church. We need a greater amount of evidence to satisfy the “adequate reasons” condition.

Here is something you may find surprising: 100 percent certainty is not a necessary condition for knowledge. If we wait around for 100 percent certainty, we would never go skiing or join a church or get married or anything else. This is especially true in considering spiritual claims, as philosopher J. P. Moreland points out:

One can know something without being certain about it and in the presence of doubt or the admission that one might be wrong. . . . When Christians claim to have knowledge of this or that, for example, that God is real, that Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is the Word of God, they are not saying that there is no possibility that they could be wrong, that they have no doubts, or that they have answers to every question raised against them.”

In a world of uncertainty, it is comforting to know that God has given us minds to think, consider arguments rationally, and reason towards conclusions, even when we do not possess all the world’s information.

Often when Dr. Moreland talks about knowledge and certainty, someone in his audience will say, “You can’t know something unless you can prove it scientifically.” Of course, while this claim is self-defeating—because it could not itself be scientifically proven—Moreland’s response goes a bit further.

This assertion—known as scientism—is patently false and, in fact, not even a claim of science but rather a philosophical view about science. Nevertheless, once this view of knowledge was widely embraced in the culture, the immediate effect was to marginalize and privatize religion by relegating it to the back of the intellectual bus. To verify this, one need only compare the number of times scientists, as opposed to pastors or theologians, are called upon as experts on the evening news. If knowledge and reason are identical with what can be tested scientifically or with scientific theories that a majority of scientists believes to be correct, then religion and ethics will no longer be viewed as true, rational domains of discourse because, supposedly, religious or ethical claims are not scientifically testable.

67 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 29.
**Scientism** is the belief that all knowledge comes through science. However, science is not the only way of knowing. In fact, in *Understanding the Times*, David Noebel and I will examine nine additional ways of knowing—theological, philosophical, ethical, psychological, sociological, political, legal, economical, and historical. The scientific method gives us a disciplined way of examining the evidence of the physical world, but it cannot reasonably claim to be the source of all truth.

Not everyone agrees with the definition of knowledge as justified true belief. Postmodern critics wonder how we can say we can have objective knowledge when we all have our own personal, subjective perspectives and biases. “Whose way of thinking is right?,” they challenge. Yes, people do have biases and perspectives, but does this mean that no truth can be known? Isn’t it possible to acknowledge that no one is “purely neutral” even while we affirm that knowledge of the truth is possible?

Christianity makes many truth claims. Some can be tested by looking at the evidence from history or archeology. Others cannot be tested this way. As we have seen, Christianity’s claims do open themselves up to rational inquiry. They can be known to be true or false. Reasonable people who seriously investigate Christianity’s claims will see this to be so, according to Morrow.

If Christianity is relegated to the realm of fairy tales, which may provide personal significance or meaning but not knowledge, then people will continue not taking the claims of Jesus or the Christian worldview seriously. If, however, people are invited to consider the claims of Christianity as a knowledge tradition, then chances are good that they may come to know the living God and live life according to the knowledge provided in his Word.70

The Bible claims to be revelation from God. Knowledge is possible. We have minds to understand it. But we must connect these dots or else God’s Word will remain senseless to us. As Greg Koukl phrases it, “We cannot grasp the authoritative teaching of God’s Word unless we use our minds properly.”71

But there is one objection we haven’t dealt with yet: does the Bible actually claim to speak the truth?

**9. DOES THE BIBLE ACTUALLY CLAIM TO BE TRUE?**

John 18:37–38 records a conversation between the Roman leader of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, and Jesus, as part of Jesus’s trial: “Then Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.’ Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’”

The question, “What is truth?” hangs in the air even today. It is likely that Pilate was familiar with the intellectual contortions ancient philosophers had performed around the question of truth. Aristotle, for example, had come up with this head-scratcher: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is

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not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false; but neither what is nor what is not said to be or not to be.”

Most people, when they hear definitions like Aristotle's, dissolve into confusion. But at root, Aristotle is saying something fairly self-evident: a belief, thought, or statement is true if it corresponds to reality. This is called the correspondence theory of truth. Philosopher Douglas Groothuis explains,

A belief or statement is true only if it matches with, reflects or corresponds to the reality it refers to. For a statement to be true it must be factual. Facts determine the truth or falsity of a belief or a statement. It is the nature and meaning of truth to be fact dependent. In other words, for a statement to be true, there must be a truth-maker that determines its truth. A statement is never true simply because someone thinks it or utters it. We may be entitled to our own opinions, but we are not entitled to our own facts. Believing a statement is one thing; that statement being true is another.

According to Groothuis, the Bible implicitly advances the correspondence view of truth—that truth is that which relates to reality. He lists many examples.

The Bible does not set forth a technical view of truth, but it does implicitly and consistently advance the correspondence view in both Testaments... The Hebrew and Greek words for truth are rich in meaning but have at their core the idea of conformity to fact. Scripture also emphasizes that God is true to his truth, meaning that he is faithful and will not lie (Hebrews 6:18). God is a God of truth, whose word is truth (John 17:17). The Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) and so will teach us true things. Jesus, the Son of God, is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), and declared himself to be “the way and the truth and the life” and that no one could come to the Father apart from him (John 14:6). The prophets (Jeremiah 8:8), Jesus (Matthew 24:24) and the apostles (1 John 4:1–6) warn of those who pervert the truth of God through errors and lies. Hence, all of Scripture puts God’s revealed objective truth at the solid center of spiritual and ethical life and faithfulness. God’s truth must be learned (Acts 17:11), mediated upon (Psalm 119) and defended (1 Peter 3:15–17; Jude 3). Error must be addressed in love (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; 2 Timothy 2:24–26), whether it is theological or moral, and whether it concerns the false beliefs of unbelievers or the false beliefs of errant Christians.

The Christian belief that reality can be known and that it is honorable to seek truth, sets Christianity apart from many world religions. It helps explain why Christianity led to the development of philosophy, science, history, and so forth, while far older religious traditions did not in other parts of the world.

73 Groothuis, Christian Apologetics, 124.
74 Ibid., 126.
Often people distinguish between **objective truth claims** (those that do not depend on one’s beliefs) and **subjective truth claims** (those that say truth changes according to one’s beliefs). The Bible clearly makes objective truth claims whose truth does not rely on whether people believe them. The Bible is a compass pointing north even when we wish it would point another way.

### 10. Why Truth Matters

Understanding of absolute, objective truth is largely lost today. Spend just a few minutes discussing issues like politics and religion, and you’ll hear someone say, “There is no truth!” or “That may be true for you, but it is not true for me.” This view, **relativism**, says truth is relative to each individual person or culture.

The silliness of relativism dawned on me in a conversation I had with one of my college professors, who indicated to our class that there are no absolute truths.

I asked, “Are you sure?”

He replied, “Yes.”

“Are you absolutely sure there are no absolutes?” I pressed.

Smiling, the professor replied, “You’re a very clever young man. If I say there are no absolutes, I’ve made an absolute statement. Let me rephrase. There is one absolute: there are no absolutes.”

I’m sure the professor was trying to make a joke, but most of my classmates were bewildered, as was I. Playing along, I said, “Thank you for admitting that there is one absolute. But is it possible or conceivable that there are two absolutes?”

“No.”

To which I replied, “Are you sure?”

By this point the professor and my classmates were all chuckling. They probably still embraced relativism, but they also realized their doing so could not be sustained philosophically.

You might try something similar. If someone says, “There is no truth,” ask, “Is that statement true?” If someone says, “That may be true for you, but not for me,” ask, “Is that statement true for both of us?” A **self-refuting claim** cannot possibly be true—it is a statement that commits suicide!

Truth is the only foundation on which to build a life, but as Jonathan Morrow points out, “We live at a time in which Christians are more consumer-driven than truth-driven.”

If believers are to effectively bear redemption to a needy world, this must change. As Kelly Monroe Kullberg puts it,

Truth yields life. If we are sailors lost at sea, we need true north. If we’re branches on tree hoping to bear fruit, which we are, we need connection to a true vine. Truth tells us where we are, who we are, to whom we belong, and the real story in which we can fully live. It seems to me that our American culture, in its present condition, is both lost and starving for truth, and therefore vulnerable to the deception of power politics, marketing schemes, and politically correct slogans of professors, politicians, and media that often lead to the death of the soul and the body. Lies lead to death and a culture of death, but the truth sets people free for life.

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75 Ibid., 13.
76 Morrow, Think Christianly, 50.
The world is desperate for truth, but without knowing God’s Word, through which he reveals his nature and character, our attempts to communicate it will be nothing more than the offering of an opinion.

II. CONCLUSION

So let’s review. Christianity says the Bible is God’s Word. Through it, the almighty God, creator of the universe, speaks to humankind—that is, the Bible is God’s revelation. As theologian Darrell Bock says,

The Bible is not a book like any other. It makes a claim that God spoke and speaks through its message. It argues that as his creatures, we are accountable to him for what he has revealed. The trustworthiness of Scripture points to its authority as well. Scripture is far more than a history book, as good and trustworthy as that history is. It is a book that calls us to examine our lives and relationship to God. Beyond the fascinating history, it contains vital and life-transforming truths about God and us.77

These claims are revolutionary and, as you can imagine, controversial, because if the Bible’s claim to reveal God is authoritative, then it extends to every area of life—to everyone in the world, at all times. And there are many who are determined not to let that happen. In the next chapter we’ll wade right into the middle of the controversy and consider whether the Bible’s claims to authority are actually authoritative for our lives today.

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77 Darrell L. Bock, Can I Trust the Bible?: Defending the Bible’s Reliability (Norcross, GA: RZIM, 2001), 52.
1. Masters of Our Fate

At 8:00 a.m., hospital personnel strapped the patient to a gurney at the federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana. The doctor calmly administered a dose of sodium thiopental, rendering the patient unconscious, followed by a dose of pancuronium bromize to stop his breathing and paralyze his body. Finally, the doctor injected a dose of potassium chloride, stopping his heart. At 8:14 a.m., June 11, 2001, the doctor pronounced him dead.
His name was Timothy McVeigh. A young man in his early thirties, McVeigh had parked a moving truck loaded with five thousand pounds of explosives in front of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City and lit the fuse. In the blast 171 people, including three unborn children, were killed.

When asked what he would say to the families of his victims, McVeigh snapped, remorselessly, “To these people in Oklahoma who have lost a loved one, I’m sorry but it happens every day. You’re not the first mother to lose a kid, or the first grandparent to lose a grandson or a granddaughter. It happens every day, somewhere in the world.” Just before his execution, he was asked for his final words. He silently handed the prison warden a handwritten copy of a poem.

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Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

You might recognize the poem. It is titled “Invictus” (Latin for “unconquered”), and it was written by William Ernest Henley (1849–1903) during a difficult illness as an anthem of perseverance. McVeigh, however, transmuted it into a paean to anarchy: I am my own authority. I answer to none.

Authority comes from a Latin word meaning “influence” or “command.” It answers the question, “Who is in charge?” Growing up, I saw the statement “Question Authority” plastered on bumper stickers and buttons and spray-painted on subway cars. There is, of course, a warranted democratic sentiment to it: don’t believe everything you hear, especially from the government. This is probably what Benjamin Franklin had in mind when he said, “It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority.”

Today, however, the statement “Question Authority” usually expresses radical individualism. “No one has the right to tell me what to do,” people say. Few enjoy being told what to do or how to think. Yet the insolent rejection of authority sweeps away the baby with the bathwater, removing both illegitimate and legitimate forms of authority; both unthinking rhetoric and public reason, both manipulation and persuasion are cast away. When all authority is banished, civil society becomes impossible. But as the iconic musician Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody.” How can we know when to submit and when to oppose?

2 Often attributed to Benjamin Franklin.
For Christians, the lines of authority are clear: to confess “Jesus is Lord” is to proclaim one’s submission to Jesus’s authority.  Refusal to acknowledge God’s authority is serious business, for we are all accountable to him. In both Romans 14:10–12 and Philippians 2:9–11 the Apostle Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 in claiming that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess to God.

The New Testament word for “obey” in Greek literally means “to hear under” (that is, to place oneself under authority). Embracing Jesus’s worldview—believing what he believed and obeying his teaching—is an invitation to “a long obedience in the same direction,” a journey toward conformity to Christ. Romans 8:29 says, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

Mindless mimicry is not the goal of our conformity to Christ. Jesus said we are to love the Lord God with our entire mind (Matthew 22:37). Paul said we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2). You do not have to be brilliant to be Christ-like, but you cannot be blissfully mindless either.

Of course, even if we are mindful, we may find ourselves baffled by God’s commands. For example, forgiving our enemies seems counterintuitive, as does patiently enduring suffering. Still, the Bible regularly invades personal space: it tells me how to treat my friends, my parents, my spouse, and my children. It tells me how to think about politics and entertainment, how to use money, and how to act toward others. Saying “Jesus is Lord” commits me to a certain way of seeing—and living in—the world.

While there is much we will not understand, Christians for millennia have maintained that what God wants is not unknowably mysterious. W. Gary Phillips, William E. Brown, and John Stonestreet explain,

If God’s Person is such that He can function with human language (certainly being greater than man!), then God could condescend to communicate verbally to man. If God’s character is such that He is both a truthful and loving Creator who is concerned about His creatures, then God would condescend to communicate verbally to man. No loving God would play cosmic hide-and-seek with His beloved ones.

Christians throughout the ages have maintained that God makes himself known most clearly through Scripture. If this is true, obedience to what the Bible says is of paramount importance. We’ll explore this idea in the coming pages, assuming the following precepts:

3 See Romans 10:9, “Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved;” and Philippians 2:9–11, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

4 Romans 14:10-12, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’”; Philippians 2:9–11, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”; Isaiah 45:23, “By myself I have sworn: from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’”


6 Matthew 22:37, “And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”

7 Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

• The Bible is authorized by God and uses human language to communicate heavenly principles to earthly society.
• The Bible is trustworthy in this communication because it is God himself who is the ultimate communicator, speaking through the authors of each of its books.
• The Bible is clear in this communication. You don't have to be a highly trained expert to understand it.
• The Bible, being in written form, can be accurately transmitted from generation to generation.
• If the Bible is authorized by God, trustworthy, and clearly communicated in written form, then it is reasonable to regard it as having authority.

In this chapter we will examine the Bible's claim to authority both internally and externally and deal with common objections such as “The Bible was only written by men,” “The Bible has been corrupted,” and “Important books have been left out of the Bible.” At the end, we'll look at what sort of commitment this authority calls for. We will begin with what the Bible says about itself.

2. Internal Evidence for the Bible's Authority

The Bible is divided into two sections, usually called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament includes thirty-nine books of history, poetry, and prophecy. The New Testament contains twenty-seven books that are history (Gospels, Acts), letters (the epistles), and the apocalyptic book of Revelation. The Old Testament narrative begins with Genesis and ends with Second Chronicles, around four hundred years before Christ. Other documents gathered in the Apocrypha (from the Greek word for “hidden”) cover the gap in time, but many Christians do not consider them authoritative with the rest of the biblical canon (from the Greek word for standard—a common word used for the accepted list of books in the Bible).

The Bible claims authority for itself, internally. To non-believers, choosing to submit to such authority sounds crazy, but the Bible claims it nonetheless. Throughout the Old Testament, phrases like “Thus says the Lord” and “The Word of the Lord came to me saying” occur over two thousand times. The writers claimed to communicate God’s authoritative revelation.

We'll discuss the authority the Bible claims for itself in three parts: Jesus’s assertion of authority, Jesus’s trust of the Bible’s authority, and Jesus’s conferring of authority on his disciples.

Jesus asserted authority. 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” or “The Word of the Lord came to me,” Jesus says, “You have heard it said, but I say to you . . . ” and, “Truly, truly, I say unto you . . . ” He claims divine authority to reveal what God wants us to understand. Here are two examples:

• Matthew 7:28–29: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.”
• Mark 2:8–12: “And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, ‘Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which

9 John 8:58, “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’”
10 John 10:30, “‘I and the Father are one.’”

DOES THE BIBLE HAVE AUTHORITY? - 46 -
is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Rise, take up your bed and walk”? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home. And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”

Jesus’s authority was not part of his office as rabbi but part of his nature as God. He claimed to be the “I Am” of the Old Testament (John 8:58). He said he and God are “one” essence (John 10:30) and that those who had seen him had seen God (John 14:7–9). Jesus claimed authority over heaven and earth, including the power of all judgment (John 5:22), astonishing his audience, his enemies, and his disciples.

In chapter 2 we talked about the Scripture being written through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus’s disciples also witnessed Jesus’s authority in the flesh and were commissioned by him to be apostles and to carry his authority to the world. As twentieth-century theologian Carl F. H. Henry put it, The apostles, to be sure, did not rest the case for Christian realities wholly upon divine inspiration, that is, upon the Spirit’s supernatural guidance in . . . written teaching. First and foremost they were eyewitnesses of the historical facets of Jesus’s life and ministry . . . [which] preceded their apostolic authorization . . . Without the resurrection eyewitnessing there would be no commission for world witnessing. Without the Spirit’s guidance there would be no divinely authoritative teaching.

The biblical account is clear: Jesus claimed authority. But that’s not all. Jesus trusted the Bible’s authority. Many people like Jesus’s decency, not his divinity; they approve of his teachings but not of the commotion regarding his claims to be God. As we have seen, though, Jesus claimed authority far beyond the goodness of his moral teachings. In fact, he claimed far more than that: he considered all of Scripture to be authoritative. One cannot consistently embrace as authoritative some of Jesus’s teaching while rejecting Jesus’s teaching about the Bible itself.

Theologian and pastor W. Gary Phillips summarizes Jesus’s trust in Scripture.

- Jesus consistently refers to the Old Testament (in both quotation and allusions) as the present and eternal truth of God. When he quotes Scripture he uses the present tense (“it says”, or “it is saying”) or the perfect tense (“it is written”, or “it stands written”). These teachings are not in the past, they are for now.

11 John 14:7–9, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’ Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me? Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”?’”
12 John 5:22, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.”
13 Specifically, Jesus claimed authority over the Sabbath (Mark 2:27–28), to forgive sin (Mark 2:5), to perform miracles (Mark 2:8–9), to raise himself from the dead (John 2:19), over the angels (Matthew 13:41), over the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:41), over the prophets throughout the centuries (Matthew 23:34), and over judgment of all the world (Matthew 25:31–46; 26:63–65; John 5:22, 27).
15 A popular movement called “Red Letter Christians” would probably take issue with this approach. The leader of the movement, a retired sociology professor named Tony Campolo, said in a response to an article in Christianity Today, “While we, like you, have a very high view of the inspiration of Scripture and believe the Bible was divinely inspired, you are correct in accusing Red Letter Christians of giving the words of Jesus priority over all other passages of Scripture. What is more, we believe that you really cannot rightly interpret the rest of the Bible without first understanding who Jesus is, what he did, and what he said.” Campolo goes on to distinguish between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of the Old Testament. Sam Guthrie, “When Red Is Blue: Why I Am Not a Red-Letter Christian,” Christianity Today, October 11, 2007, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/33.100.html?start=2. My point is that this is a distinction Jesus himself did not make.
• Jesus always assumes Scripture is final in authority and that all parts are of equal authority, whether it is an obscure reference to how King David referred to God (Matthew 22:41–45, in reference to Psalm 110:1) or the Pharisees’ objection to him calling himself the Son of God (John 10:34–36, in reference to Psalm 82:6).

• Jesus always assumes Old Testament prophecies must be fulfilled as given (Matthew 5:17). He refers to them as that which “must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

• Jesus always treats the miraculous events of the Old Testament as if they occurred exactly as written. This is true even for the ones thought to be scientifically “embarrassing” today, such as Adam and Eve’s literal existence, Noah’s flood, Sodom’s judgment, Moses’s burning bush, the miracle of manna in the wilderness, and the story of Jonah and the great fish.

• Jesus leans on the Old Testament in his personal spiritual anguish. He does this during his temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–10) and in his crucifixion, when he quotes Psalm 22 (see Matthew 27:46).

• Jesus never hesitates to confront error, but he says absolutely nothing about problems in the Scriptures. Apparently, at least in the parts of his ministry recorded in the gospels, Jesus found nothing to confront in the Old Testament. If anything, he builds on the foundation of the Old Testament by clarifying the profound extent to which its teachings must be applied. (For example, in Matthew 5:27–28, he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”)

Summarizing Jesus’s teachings, Henry said, “All four Gospels evidence the truth that Jesus affirmed the authority of Scripture. Luke 24:25 records Christ’s view of the authority of the Old Testament, and this, in correlation with John 14:26, implies his similar view of the New Testament.”

Jesus’s disciples were eyewitnesses to his authority.

Jesus conferred authority on his disciples. Jesus’s disciples were eyewitnesses to his authority.

And before the completion of his earthly ministry, Jesus conferred his own authority upon them.

• Matthew 10:1: “And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.”

• Matthew 11:27: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

This conferred authority extended beyond the time boundaries of Jesus’s earthly ministry.

16 Matthew 22:41–45, “Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, ‘What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?” If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?’” In reference to Psalm 110:1, “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

17 John 10:34–36, “Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your Law, “I said, you are gods”? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”?‘” In reference to Psalm 82:6, “I said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.’”

18 Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

19 Luke 24:44, “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’”

20 Matthew 27:46, “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

21 Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4, 51.
• John 14:25–26: “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.”
• John 15:26–27: “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”
• John 16:12–15: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

On the night before going to the cross, Jesus imparted authority to his disciples, praying, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20). And after his resurrection, Jesus issued a clear and powerful statement of conferred authority that we call the Great Commission.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).

The disciples obeyed. They went proclaiming this message “in Jesus’s name” (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 12, 17–18, 30). Even Jesus’s enemies recognized the authority with which Jesus’s disciples spoke: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

Jesus had authority, the disciples were given authority by him, and their work was authoritative because he said it would be. Peter classified Paul’s collected writings with the “Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16); Paul even quoted Luke’s gospel and called it “scripture” (1 Timothy 5:8; 2 Peter 3:16).

Let’s review. Jesus claimed authority for his own ministry, for the Scriptures, and for the ministry of his disciples. Skeptics might still be skeptical, though. Is there any evidence outside Scripture offering credibility to the Bible’s authority? The answer is an emphatic “yes.” Let’s take a look at some of this evidence now.

3. External Evidence for the Bible’s Authority

A person’s testimony about him- or herself constitutes internal evidence for authority. But the claims of others external to the person can add a different kind of credibility. So far, we’ve examined Jesus’s authority based on the words of the Bible itself, but is there any testimony about the Bible’s truthfulness from outside sources? If a longtime basketball player said, “My career

22 2 Peter 3:16, “As he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, pas they do the other Scriptures.”
23 1 Timothy 5:8, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” 2 Peter 3:16, “As he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, pas they do the other Scriptures.”
three-point shot percentage was 65 percent,” we might scoff in doubt. If, however, we uncovered an old record book verifying the claim, we might reasonably say, “It sounds too good to be true, but I must give this player’s claim the benefit of the doubt.”

The absence of external evidence, though, would not mean the player is lying. He might be telling the truth but, for one reason or another, we choose not to believe him. In the same way, lack of external evidence would not be proof of the Bible’s falsity. Kenneth A. Kitchen says, “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

Philip R. Davies provides an example of why we should not assume a biblical source is untrustworthy just because we haven’t yet found evidence. A professor at the University of Sheffield in England, Davies wrote the following in a book called In Search of Ancient Israel: “There are no literary criteria for believing David to be more historical than Joshua, Joshua more historical than Abraham, and Abraham more historical than Adam. There is no non-literary way of making this judgment either, since none of these characters has left a trace outside the biblical text!” But just a year after Davies’s book was published, an inscription referring to “the house of David” was found at the Tel Dan archaeological dig. Such an inscription implies not only the existence of David but also a kingly dynasty named after him. Israel Finkelstein, Professor of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, remarked, “Biblical nihilism collapsed overnight with the discovery of the David inscription.” And more recently, archaeologists have discovered what they believe to be a palace or temple of David, providing additional evidence for David as a historical person.

The presence of historically verifiable external evidence, such as the David inscription and discovery of a Davidic temple, adds weight to the Bible’s truthfulness. It provides the kind of converging evidence one would expect a divinely authoritative book to possess. Not all discoveries are as dramatic as the David inscription, but as television correspondent and religion writer Jeffrey Sheler observed,

> We have discovered an abundance of evidence—both direct and indirect—that sheds light on the historical claims and the context of the Scriptures. . . . As we have examined that evidence and considered the scholarly arguments drawn from it, and as we have compared the Scriptures to other written histories from the ancient Near East, we have found the Bible consistently and substantially affirmed as a credible and reliable source of history.

Dennis Ingolfsland at Crown College has compiled a lengthy list of archaeological discoveries from each of several centuries before Christ verifying the accuracy of many of the Bible’s claims. These discoveries do not establish the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of the Bible, but they do point to the reasonableness of belief in Scripture’s truthfulness. Here are a few examples.

- Eleventh century B.C.—Most of the cities mentioned from Genesis through the book of Joshua have been discovered: Ur and Erech (Genesis 10:10); Shechem (Genesis 12:6);

24 Kenneth A. Kitchen, Ancient Orient and the Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 30–32. Kitchen’s particular point had to do with archaeological evidence, but the principle he stated so cleverly applies generally to the investigation of historical claims too.
28 Sheler, Is the Bible True?, 254.
29 Genesis 10:10, “The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.”
30 Genesis 12:6, “Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.”
Gerar (Genesis 20:1), Pithom and Raamsees (Exodus 1:11), Arad, Jericho, Lachish, Bethel, Gezer, Ashdod, Bethshan, Megiddo, Hazor, and Eglon (Joshua 10:34–35); Shiloah, Joppa, and Hammath (Joshua 19:35).

- Tenth century B.C.—Some of the building projects of Solomon have been unearthed at Megiddo and Gezer. At tenth-century Megiddo levels there was a palace fortified by a massive wall and defensive towers, as well as stables.

- Ninth century B.C.—The Monolith Inscription of Shalmaneser mentions “Ahab the Israelite” as having the most powerful military elements in the Israelite and Syrian coalition.

- Eighth century B.C.—The Khorsabad Annals give the account of Sargon II captivity of Samaria in 722: “I besieged and captured Samaria, carrying off 27,290 of the people who dwell therein.”

- Seventh century B.C.—The tunnel Hezekiah built to bring water into Jerusalem has been found (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:30). It even had an inscription written in eighth-century script.

- Sixth century B.C.—The Annals of Nebuchadnezzar II mention the taking of “the city of Judah” (Jerusalem) by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:10). It says that he appointed a new king (2 Kings 24:17) and that he carried great amounts of treasure from Jerusalem to Babylon (2 Kings 24:13–16).

- Fifth century B.C.—Critics once denied many aspects of the book of Ezra on the basis that the Aramaic segment it contains was late. They dated it to the third century B.C., after the time of Alexander the Great. The discovery of the Elephantine papyri (legal contracts, deeds, official documents, agreements, diplomatic texts, and private letters) show that Aramaic was the language of trade and diplomacy in the time of Ezra and that the Aramaic used in the book of Ezra was characteristic of the fifth century B.C.

This is remarkable external evidence. And volumes of such evidence have been collected. To start, we recommend *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* by Kenneth A. Kitchen (Professor Emeritus of Egyptology and Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology, University of Liverpool, England).

31 Genesis 20:1, “From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar.”

32 Exodus 1:11, “Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.”

33 Joshua 10:34–35, “Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Lachish to Eglon. And they laid siege to it and fought against it. And they captured it on that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword. And he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had done to Lachish.”

34 Joshua 19:35, “The fortified cities are Ziddim, Zer, Hammath, Rakkath, Chinnereth.”


36 Ibid., 127.


39 2 Kings 24:10, “At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged.”

40 2 Kings 24:17, “And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah.”

41 2 Kings 24:13–16, “And carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord, which Solomon king of Israel had made, as the Lord had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land. And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon. The king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, 17,000, and the craftsmen and the metal workers, 1,000, all of them strong and fit for war.” See Matthews, *Old Testament Parallels*, 141–43.

What about the historical reliability of the New Testament? First, several documents outside the Bible support the basic outlines of the story told in the Gospels. Historian Edwin Yamauchi concludes,

Even if we did not have the New Testament or Christian writings, we would be able to conclude from such non-Christian writings as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger that . . . Jesus was a Jewish teacher; many people believed he performed healings and exorcisms; he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64; all kinds of people from the cities and countryside—men and women, slave and free—worshipped him as God by the beginning of the second century. 43

This kind of evidence does not prove Jesus’s life and actions, but a reasonable person, in view of how this evidence converges with the biblical testimony, should give Scripture the benefit of the doubt.

The Book of Acts in the New Testament is an interesting place to look for confirming evidence because it is a storyline within which most of the writings of the Apostle Paul are embedded. Written by Luke, the medical doctor mentioned earlier, Acts of the Apostles gives a number of historical details for which we might be able find archaeological evidence. New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce in his book The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? collected a remarkable listing of historical affirmations (having to do with terminology and titles) that begin with the first missionary journey in Acts 13, all of which validate the historical accuracy of the only “history book” of the early church. 44

For example, skeptics have challenged the reference to “proconsuls” (plural) in Acts 19:38 because elsewhere there was only one proconsul at a time. 45 But proconsul Junius Silanus had been assassinated a few months before the Ephesian riot by “messengers” from Agrippina, mother of the recently installed emperor Nero. These two “messengers” assumed the reins of government until their successor arrived from Rome. If the events of Acts 19 took place (as it seems) within

43 Quoted in Michael J. Wilkens and J. P. Moreland, Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 221–22.
44 F. F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). Some other examples from the Acts of the Apostles include: (1) Acts 15:7—Cyprus became a senatorial province (as opposed to “imperial” province) in 22 B.C., and thus the governor was rightly called “proconsul” Sergius Paulus; (2) Acts 16:12, 20, 35—“praetors” (magistrates of Philippi) were attended by “lictors” (sergeants, with whose rods Paul and Silas were beaten—these titles are confirmed by the Roman writer Cicero); (3) Acts 17:6, 9—at Thessalonica, the term “politarchs” (found in no other city) was corroborated by an inscription discovered at Thessalonica; (4) Acts 18:12—Achaia had been a senatorial province only since 44 A.D., thus the term “proconsul” for Gallio, who had arrived in July of A.D. 51, is entirely accurate; (5) Acts 19:31—at Ephesus, the term “town clerk” referred to a local official who acted as link between municipal government and Roman administration; also, the term “Asiarchs” also is accurate, referring to chief priests of the ‘Rome and the Emperor’ cult from throughout the province, who would have been in Ephesus to represent the Emperor during the festival of Artemis; (6) Acts 19:35—also at Ephesus, the term “Warden of the Temple” is confirmed in an inscription describing the city of Ephesus as the “Temple-Warden” of Artemis; (7) Acts 28:7—the title of the ruler of Malta was “first man of the island,” which is corroborated by both Greek and Latin inscriptions. Dr. Bruce cites the confusing way an Oxford University student refers to the Heads of Oxford colleges by their proper titles: Provost of Oriel, Master of Lalliol, Rector of Exeter, President of Magdalen, and so on. These titles are very difficult for someone in another part of academia, even within the United Kingdom. Furthermore, they don’t change every decade or so the way they did in the Greco-Roman Empire.
45 Acts 19:38, “If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another.”

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this window of time, then this serves as a remarkable case of historical accuracy.  

We can learn two things from this example. First, the person who wrote the Acts of the Apostles accurately recorded verifiable details, making him a credible witness. Second, in the ancient world there is really no way someone would have known these details unless they had actually traveled to the cities that are described. The various verified accounts provide evidence that the journeys took place the way the author says they did.

The evidence provided here just scratches the surface. There is much more evidence affirming the basic historical truthfulness of the Bible in those areas which can be verified, even with accounts of miracles that people today find unbelievable. John P. Meier, a professor at the University of Notre Dame, rigorously studied the gospel miracles and reported his findings in a volume more than 1,100 pages in length. He found that almost half of them included enough detail to conclude that the historical scene they described could, in fact, have occurred as reported. Graham Twelftree, a professor at Regent University Divinity School, thinks the percentage is even higher: possibly three-fourths of the miracle accounts in the Gospels included historical details that could be verified.

Such evidence gives skeptics good reason to acknowledge the basic truthfulness of the Bible. For the Christian, the motivation is even stronger: the testimony of Jesus about the Bible, about himself, and about his disciples is powerful evidence of the Bible's claim for an authority that extends to every aspect of our lives.

Even so, many questions remain: how could the Bible, written by men, actually claim to be authoritative over our lives? Wasn't the Bible corrupted over time? What about other “gospels” and ancient texts ignored by the early church fathers—don't those disprove some of the things in the Bible? Let's take a look at each of these objections.

4. Answering Objections to the Authority of the Bible

People are skeptical of the Bible for all sorts of reasons—some good and some bad. Here are the three most common objections.

Objection #1: The Bible was only written by men. Obviously the Bible did not descend from heaven in its complete form. It was penned by about forty authors over a time span of approximately 1,500 years. Even so, the Bible describes the origin of Scripture as a process that is both fully human and fully divine.

- The Apostle Peter: “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20–21).
- The Apostle Paul: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through

46 Bruce, New Testament Documents, 84.
48 Graham H. Twelftree, Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), chaps. 1–2.
faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14–17).

Here’s the rub. We know that people are capable of lying (either on purpose or by letting mistaken impressions stand) or of writing untrue things because they were deceived into believing them. A skeptic might insist, at some point in the course of the 1,500 years it took to compile the Bible, this must have happened, right? So how can we trust the authority of Scripture?

To answer this objection we must first decide whether humans are capable of saying or writing anything that is true. If so, would they not be capable of truthfully writing down what God told them to? Greg Koukl makes this point through a series of questions: “Do you have any books in your library? Were those books written by humans? Do you find any truth in them? Is there a reason you think the Bible is less truthful or reliable than other books you own? Do people always make mistakes in what they write? Do you think that if God did exist, he would be capable of using humans to write down exactly what he wants? If not, why not?”

In the end, the person who insists that the authors of the Bible must have lied or been deceived is often objecting to the Bible as a way to indirectly cast doubt on God’s existence. Well-placed questions such as these are good ways to dislodge threadbare slogans and get to the heart of the issue.

If you assume God does not exist, then of course the authority of God’s Word seems like nonsense. However, if it is reasonable to believe God does exist (and we will examine such evidence in subsequent chapters), then the “written by men” objection begs the question. If someone brings it up, ask, “Before we talk about the objection of the Bible being written by men, can I ask you this—do you find the evidence of God’s existence persuasive? Why or why not?”

Here’s something else to consider. The Bible contains many, many fulfilled prophecies. Some of these are so specific that it defies imagination to think that they could have been written merely by human sources with no knowledge of the future. D. James Kennedy tells a story about an encounter he had about fulfilled prophecy in the life of Jesus.

Some time ago I had the opportunity to speak to a man who had no belief whatsoever in the Scriptures as any sort of divine revelation from God. He was a writer who was articulate and well-educated. While he was well-read, he was completely ignorant of any evidences for the truthfulness of the Christian faith and the Scriptures which reveal it. He said the Bible was simply a book written by men, just like any other book. I said, “That’s very interesting. I would like to read some statements to you about someone and have you tell me, assuredly, without question, about whom I am reading.”

49 Gregory Koukl, Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 44.

I said to him, “About whom did I read?” He replied, “Well, you obviously read of the life and ministry and suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.” I said, “Is there any question in your mind about that?” He answered, “No, that could refer to no one else.”

I replied, “Well then, I would want you to understand that all of the Scriptures I just read to you are taken from the Old Testament, which was completed some four hundred years before Jesus was born. No critic, no atheist, no agnostic has ever once claimed that any one of those writings was written after His birth. In fact, they were translated from Hebrew into Greek in Alexandria some 150 years before He was born. If this is merely a book written by men, would you please explain to me how these words were written?”

A note of caution: a number of the prophecies Kennedy references were general in nature and had meaning at the time but in retrospect could also be applied to Jesus. Yet, even with this consideration in mind, the sheer weight of evidence has convinced many Bible scholars that it could not have been an accident. The Old Testament writers were led to write about something that could only have made complete sense when viewed backward through the lens of Jesus’s life and work.

**Objection #2: The Bible has been corrupted.** This objection is sometimes called “The Telephone Game Objection.” Maybe you’ve played the game where a person whispers a statement into a second person’s ear, who then whispers it to a third, and so forth, until the last person says aloud what he was told. It’s usually hilariously wrong, even bizarre. If we can’t communicate one simple statement around a room with any accuracy, how is it possible for the Bible to have been transmitted accurately by hundreds of people over the course of thousands of years?

This objection is particularly important to Muslims who contend for the validity of the Quran based largely on the argument that the modern day Bible has been cleansed of Islamic teachings and is therefore corrupted. Unfortunately for scholars of Islam, large portions of Old Testament texts, dating to and before the first century A.D., illustrate that the texts we have are substantially the same as those Jesus and Paul had, making it difficult for Muslim scholars to argue that the Old Testament was corrupted sometime after Jesus’s death. If you get into a conversation with a Muslim acquaintance about this, ask, “If God can sustain the Quran throughout the ages, can he not sustain the biblical texts?” The evidence shows that he has preserved his Word.
It is in fact true that we have no original manuscripts of the Old or New Testaments. According to Jonathan Morrow, however, this isn’t a serious objection to the validity of the texts we do possess.

To begin with, you need to know that none of the original manuscripts of either the Old or New Testaments are still in existence—all that remain are imperfect copies. But this is exactly the same situation of all the other ancient works of literature as well. No one has the originals. While this may come as a surprise, this fact should not turn us into skeptics regarding ancient texts. But we do need to recognize how the composition and transmission of ancient documents worked.

Paul, however, is not so easily dismissed. He both introduces and concludes his letter to the Romans by noting how the gospel he proclaims stems from the Old Testament. In fact, all throughout the New Testament we see affirmations of the Old Testament as inspired by God.

Muslim critics also like to argue that there are differences between the teachings of Jesus, whom they consider to be a prophet, and the Apostle Paul, who they think corrupted Jesus’s teachings. Paul, however, is not so easily dismissed. He both introduces and concludes his letter to the Romans by noting how the gospel he proclaims stems from the Old Testament. In fact, all throughout the New Testament we see affirmations of the Old Testament as inspired by God. Paul also noted that the law and the prophets testified to the heart of the gospel—the righteousness of God (Romans 3:21).

He taught that his ministry and message about Christ confirmed God’s promises to the patriarchs: “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Romans 15:8–9a).

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Other writings from antiquity are not seriously doubted (e.g., Aristotle, Livy, etc.), so why should the Bible be held to a different standard?

Here’s a more important question, though. In the absence of original manuscripts, do scholars have enough evidence to reconstruct the text? New Testament textual critic Daniel Wallace says “yes.”

The wealth of material that is available for determining the wording of the original New Testament is staggering: more than fifty-seven hundred Greek New Testament manuscripts, as many as twenty thousand versions, and more than one million quotations by patristic writers. In comparison with the average ancient Greek author, the New Testament copies are well over a thousand times more plentiful. If the average-sized manuscript were two and one-half inches thick, all the copies of the works of an average Greek author would stack up four feet high, while the copies of the New Testament would stack up to over a mile high! This is indeed an embarrassment of riches.

Scholars of other ancient texts would love to have the “problem” New Testament scholars have. Still, if all these copies were duplicated over and over again, wouldn’t mistakes accumulate over time, corrupting the text? To answer this question, we must understand the nature of copy mistakes. When scholars examine multiple manuscripts, they can compare them word by word, sentence by sentence. Often differences arise, called textual variants. And because we have so many manuscripts, the number of textual variants between the manuscripts is quite high. Skeptic Bart Ehrman refers to four hundred thousand textual variants quite often, so we will go with that.

Essentially there are four kinds of textual variants.
1. Spelling and unclear readings
2. Changes that can’t be translated, such as words that do not have an equivalent meaning in the language being translated into, or word order (e.g., “Christ Jesus” vs. “Jesus Christ”)
3. Meaningful variants that are not viable (i.e., variants that are just not plausible and occur in questionable manuscripts)
4. Meaningful and viable variants (i.e., variants that are both plausible and affect the meaning of the text)

The only variants of serious concern to biblical scholars are those in the fourth group because they are in trusted manuscripts and affect the meaning of the text. As Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace summarize, though, “Less than one percent of all textual variants are both meaningful and viable, and by ‘meaningful’ we don’t mean to imply earth-shattering significance but rather, almost always, minor alterations to the meaning of the text.”

This comes out to fewer than four thousand of the original four hundred thousand variants having any real significance at all for the meaning of a verse. And none of these affect any core doctrines, according to Bock and Wallace.

The bottom line is this. What we have in the New Testament today, with 99 percent accuracy, is essentially what was written then. If this is so, the Telephone Game Objection simply doesn’t apply to New Testament texts. Wallace explains why.

In the telephone game the goal is to garble an original utterance so that by the end of the line it doesn’t resemble the original at all. There’s only one line of transmission, it is oral rather than written, and the oral critic (the person who is trying to figure out what the original utterance was) only has the last person in line to interrogate. When it comes to the text of the NT, there are multiple lines of transmission, and the original documents were almost surely copied several times (which would best explain why they wore out by the end of the second century). Further, the textual critic doesn’t rely on just the last person in the transmissional line, but can interrogate many scribes over the centuries, way back to the second century. And even when the early manuscript testimony is sparse, we have the early church fathers’ testimony as to what the original text said. Finally, the process is not intended to be a parlor game but is intended to duplicate the original text faithfully—and this process doesn’t rely on people hearing a whole utterance whispered only once, but seeing the text and copying it. The telephone game is a far cry from the process of copying manuscripts of the New Testament.

Still, those who uphold the Telephone Game Objection have played a valuable role in apologetics, pressing biblical scholars carefully to examine the evidence, which in turn has served to reinforce the Bible’s trustworthiness.

**Objection #3:** Important books have been left out of the Bible.

In 1945, fifty-two papyri were discovered at Nag Hammadi in lower Egypt. Some of these texts had the word “gospel” in the title. Scholars have known about these and other second through fourth-century documents for a long time, but in a culture that loves conspiracy theories and “cover ups,” these so-called Lost Gospels make an irresistible story for investigative reports on television.

Why are these Lost Gospels excluded from the biblical canon? Generally speaking, there were three criteria used to decide which books were received as authoritative—that is, as Scripture.

1. **Apostolicity:** was a book written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle? Mark was accepted because he was an associate of Peter and Luke was accepted because of his relationship to Paul. Or to put it another way, if the book was not from the first century, it was not Scripture because it could not be historically connected to the apostles who were taught and commissioned by Jesus (who was crucified in A.D. 30–33).

2. **Orthodoxy:** did this book conform to the teachings and theology of other books known by the apostles?

3. **Pedigree:** was the book accepted early on in the life of the church and by the majority of churches across the region? It was important that a book wasn’t just accepted in one location but that lots of Christians in different cities and regions accepted it.

Based on these criteria, the Lost Gospels, while historically interesting, are inferior to the canonical writings contained in the New Testament. The New Testament writings all date to the first century when the Apostles—or those who could have interviewed them—would have been alive.

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65 Strikingly, the apostle Paul applied his strict criterion for biblical knowledge and truth to his own writings. In fact, he proclaimed that if his own future writings deviated from the inspired truth already received from God, they should be rejected. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote, “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12). This is significant because Paul had just made this declaration: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8).

66 This is summarized from Jonathan Morrow’s article in *The Apologetics Study Bible for Students*, ed. Sean McDowell (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 1230.
first century when the Apostles—or those who could have interviewed them—would have been alive.

Here's something else of interest: there was a collection of texts already functioning as Scripture in the early church, long before the emperor Constantine could have “decreed” them as Scripture (as books like Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code claim). New Testament scholars Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger summarize as follows.

The concept of canon not only existed before the middle of the second century, but . . . a number of New Testament books were already received and being used as authoritative documents in the life of the church. Given the fact that such a trend is evident in a broad number of early texts—2 Peter, 1 Timothy, 1 Clement, the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp, Barnabas, and Papias—we have good historical reasons to think that the concept of a New Testament canon was relatively well established and perhaps even a widespread reality by the turn of the century. Although the borders of the canon were not yet solidified by this time, there is no doubt that the early church understood that God had given a new set of authoritative covenant documents that testified to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and that those documents were the beginning of the New Testament canon. Such a scenario provides a new foundation for how we view the historical evidence after c. AD 150. For example, the Muratorian Fragment reveals that by c. AD 180 the early church had received all four Gospels, all thirteen epistles of Paul, the book of Acts, Jude, the Johannine epistles (at least two of them), and the book of Revelation. Yet, in light of the evidence viewed here, some of these books had already been received and used long before the middle of the second century and viewed as part of the revelation of the new covenant (though we do not know how many). Thus, the Muratorian Fragment does not appear to be establishing or “creating” a canon but is expressly affirming what has already been the case within the early church.67

All of the extant “Lost” or “Missing” Gospels are from the second century or later. Therefore they are not our earliest and best sources. They fail the test of having been written by an Apostle or produced through a direct interview with one.

Most important, the worldviews and theology of many of the Lost Gospels—such as the Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Philip, and many others—are inconsistent with the teachings of earliest Christianity. Their theology is based on Gnosticism, not orthodox Christianity.68 Gnosticism taught that the world was made by a lesser divine being and that the material world and body were intrinsically evil. Because Jesus appearing in a body would have corrupted his ministry, Gnostics believed Jesus was merely a spirit who appeared to be human. Gnostics taught that our main problem is ignorance, not sin, and that it is possible to gain “special knowledge” leading to salvation for those clever enough to decode it.69 In short, these Lost Gospels

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teach a false gospel. The early church fathers therefore rejected them after careful study. In spite of sensationalist claims in the media, these Lost Gospels were known in the early centuries after Christ’s ministry and rejected for very good reasons.

5. How Far Does God’s Authority Extend?

If God actually exists and if the revelation about him is trustworthy, then he has authority. How far does this authority extend? The often neglected third verse of Isaac Watts’s “Joy to the World” might help us here.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

How far did Watts think God’s authority extends? As far as the curse is found—which is everywhere, because nothing in the world is untouched by human sin. J. Norval Geldenhuys wrote,

As Creator and Sustainer of the universe he has the absolute right over all created beings and an all-embracing authority in heaven as on earth. This final and supreme authority gives him the unlimited prerogative to command and enforce obedience, to unconditionally possess and absolutely govern all things at all times in all places of the universe.

Because God created and sustains the universe, his authority is supreme over all. That means that all other legitimate authorities have derived authority—that is, what authority they possess has been ordained or permitted by God.

If what we’ve seen so far is accurate, the authority of the Bible does not rest on the ponderous decision of some church council. Its authority comes from God. Carl F. H. Henry explains,

The classical view of inspiration refuses to ground the authority of Scripture in the common life of the community of faith; it correlates that authority instead with a divinely imparted property of the scriptural texts. Nor does it, as frequently charged, in any way reduce the issue of religious authority to a circular argument. The classic view discussed divine authority in the contexts of the authority of God, self-revealed in Christ, attested by general and special revelation, including scriptural authority, as objective factors.

If the Bible is indeed from God to us, there is nothing that exists that escapes the authority of Scripture: cultures, governments, life, death, family, entertainment—all are to be subjected to God’s authority.

Let’s take a look at several areas subject to God’s authority as revealed in Scripture.

70 The writings of many of the church fathers are still available in printed form if you would like to study their arguments in more detail. For example, see Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus of Lyons. Project Gutenberg, accessed March 12, 2015, http://self.gutenberg.org/article/WHEBN0000015414/Irenaeus#Scripture.

71 For detailed information on how the books of the Bible were carefully selected, see F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996).


73 Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority, vol. 4, 93–94.
God has authority over the limits of reason. Our worldview determines the limits and standards for what we would consider “reasonable.” A biblical worldview commits us to a view of reality larger than our ability to explain everything it contains. A biblical worldview means that God determines what is reasonable and what is not. For example, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac because Abraham believed God could raise Isaac from the dead, even though no miracles of resurrection had yet occurred in history. Abraham’s worldview was enlarged because “reasonable” for Abraham no longer merely included only natural possibilities but grew also to include the realm of supernatural. If God exists, then our definition of what is reasonable must expand by its very nature.

God has authority over our understanding of reality. A biblical worldview commits us to a view of reality larger than our capacity to understand it. We tend to believe only what we can see or prove, but a biblical worldview includes spiritual entities (including God himself). Being finite and limited, we cannot see or touch some of the things Scripture describes, such as Satan, angels, and demons. Yet the Bible describes these as utterly real. Second Corinthians 4:18 says, “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” In talking about the armor of God, Ephesians 6:12 says, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The Old Testament tells of the prophet Elisha who had so angered his enemies that they sent an army to capture him. Elisha’s servant Gehazi was terrified until Elisha prayed that God would open his eyes to see the greater reality—that the King of Aram’s mighty army was completely outnumbered by much more powerful spiritual forces (2 Kings 6:17).

God has authority over culture. Time and again, in both testaments, believers are tempted to embrace the values and morals of the surrounding cultures, whether they were the Canaanites in the Old Testament or the Corinthians in the New Testament. Contrary to the practices of many cultures, though, following God meant obeying him. The prophets and apostles regularly confronted evil practices within their own cultures. These practices are not legitimized by them as “true for the culture that practiced them.” Instead, the truths of Scripture are true for all cultures at all times. Postmodernists may say this is impossible, that cultures are too different, but Carl F. H. Henry disagrees: “Russians, Chinese, Koreans, and others have no problem learning the formulas of modern physics and the foreign languages in which implications are expounded for nuclear bombing and space shuttling. If scientists can communicate their ideas across cultural barriers, God certainly can do so.”

God has authority over entertainment. The voices of entertainers speak authoritatively over such wide-ranging issues as abortion, the environment, and spirituality—topics about which those entertainers have rarely been educated. And yet these voices are considered to be authoritative because millions of people listen to them and watch their videos on YouTube. Notoriety, however, is not the same as authority. The number of people who believe an idea is rarely an indication in itself of the idea’s truth. In a world where popularity is equated with being right, God claims

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74 See Hebrews 11:17-19, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

75 2 Kings 6:17, “Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

76 Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority, vol. 4, 115
authority over what voices we pay attention to and insists that we filter out what is not true or not worth thinking about (Philippians 4:8). 77

God has authority over our senses. We've all been to enough magic shows to know that our senses can be deceived. We may see and hear things we think are true but are not. The Bible values our senses, given to us by God, as ways to know truth. The authority of the Bible extends beyond what we are able to verify with our senses. The Bible claims to be a reality check when our senses fail us. The apostle John wrote, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands . . . testify and proclaim to you the eternal life” (1 John 1:1–3). Peter, for example, described being both an “eyewitness” and an “ear-witness” to the Transfiguration of Jesus. These observations did not prove to him the truth of what he had seen, but only served to “have the prophetic word more fully confirmed.” 78

God has authority over our emotions. God repeatedly expresses his authority over the emotional life. He commands that we love him and love others (Luke 10:27). 79 He even commands that we love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:44). 80 Truth is not determined by our feelings. Truth is not determined by what makes us comfortable. Truth does not depend on how many people agree with us. Feelings can guide us to truth, but they can also mislead us. We may feel good about things that are untrue and bad about things that are true. As Flannery O'Connor said, “Truth does not change according to my ability to stomach it.” 81

God has authority over knowledge. It is common for people to say, “I won't believe something unless it can be proven scientifically.” They assume science to be the most reliable means of knowing. Later in this volume we will explore the topic of science and the Bible, but for now it is worth noting that to believe only what science can prove excludes anything that cannot be empirically demonstrated, including principles of origins, supernatural truths, any universally applicable truth, and even the underlying principles of science itself. 82 Half a century ago Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed,

If you study the history of science you will have much less respect for its supposed supreme authority than you had when you began. It is nothing but a simple fact of history to say that a hundred years ago and less, scientists were teaching dogmatically and with extreme confidence that the thyroid gland, the pituitary gland, and other glands were nothing but vestigial remains. They said that they had no value and no function whatsoever. . . . But today we know that these glands are essential to life. 83

77 Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”
78 1 Peter 1:16–21, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (emphasis mine). See also Acts 22:9 and John 12:27–30.
79 Luke 10:27, “And he answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’”
80 Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”
82 On this, Carl F. H. Henry says, “Only on the basis of the scriptural witness...do we know that God is creator ex nihilo of heaven and earth and is lord of the whole universe; no view of origins or principle of universal applicability can be established empirically. Since its teaching centers in supraempirical realities, much of what the Bible teaches cannot be empirically demonstrated. To replace scriptural authority with some rival authority-principle abridges historic Christian commitments in respect to Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and practice” (God, Revelation, and Authority, vol. 4. 43).
83 David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Authority (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1958), 40.
The truth is, biblical writers were enabled by the Holy Spirit at times to “write better than they knew” and better than the science of that day could grasp. God has authority over governments. Psalm 2:1–6 says,

Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

Even the authority of nations is derived from and dependent upon God (whether that authority is acknowledged or not) and, as revealed in the Bible, will accomplish God’s purpose for all nations. In response to Pilate, Jesus said, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). Romans 13:1–2 says there is no authority except that which is from God. Jesus specifically instructed his followers not to fear human authorities because they only have the capacity to destroy the body (Luke 12:4–5). In Acts 5:29, when confronting unjust governmental authority, Peter and the apostles say, “We must obey God rather than men.” When governing authorities conflict with the authority of God, obedience is rendered to God alone. Why? As Revelation 13:7 states, “Authority over every tribe and people and language and nation was given to him.”

6. CONCLUSION

If every area of life falls under God’s authority, God has the right to tell us what to do. We are told by Scripture to be stewards of our minds (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:2, 10), our physical bodies (1 Corinthians 6:12–20), our spouses (Ephesians 5:18–33), and our children.

84 A good example, proposed by Alva J. McClain, is of God’s revelation to Abram, that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). To us, because we know there are billions of stars, that claim would be a good example of hyperbole that communicates a vast number of descendants. But for Abram, in that day, the promise would have seemed lame. There are only about four thousand stars visible to the naked eye even on a level horizon on the clearest night. But later when the same promise was repeated, Abram was told that his descendants would be as the stars in the sky, and “as the sand which is on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). To Abram that would have seemed a much greater promise: to us a few hundred years after Galileo invented the telescope, we know the comparisons to be equivalent. God spoke (and that promise was recorded for us) better than any scientist of his day could have understood. See Alva J. McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2001).
85 Romans 13:1–2, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”
86 Luke 12:4–5, “I tell you, my friends, ado not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”
87 Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world”; Ephesians 4:23, “and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds”; Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”; Colossians 3:10, “And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

Nothing is excluded. God’s authority extends beyond what we can perceive with our senses to all areas of knowledge and over all human authority. God’s worldview is bigger than ours. Will we live small, or will we live big?
(Deuteronomy 6:4–8). 88 We are told to be truthful and loving and not to gossip (Ephesians 4:15, 25; James 1:19, 26), and to be generous and hospitable to all people (Romans 12:1–21). Biblical truth is not relative but absolute (John 17:17), and Jesus is the only way to it (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

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In the end, everyone must decide where they will place their faith. When I get on an airplane, I put my faith in the pilots, the air traffic control system, physics, engineering, the maintenance crew, the integrity of the airplane's structure, the quality of the fuel company that refined and delivered the jet fuel, and an endless number of other people and factors. This is not blind faith, however; based on extensive experience, I trust the system designed to put airplanes safely in the air. Is it possible that my faith is misplaced? Yes. But no one can live apart from ongoing faith in the truths and systems we have come to trust as reliable, or as “true.”

Trust in the authority of Scripture is like trust in the airline system. It is not blind. God expresses his authority in Scripture, which, we have good reason to believe, is both internally and externally trustworthy. Jesus claims authority, and the accuracy of biblical documents lends credence to his claim. Jesus also shows trust in the Old Testament revelation and lends his authority to those who later write the New Testament. Common objections to this trustworthiness only strengthen the Bible's claim to authority.

And so we have come full circle. Bob Dylan was right: you gotta serve somebody. But whom? Some find they have a problem with authority. Others don't want to accept the lifestyle the Bible says is best for human flourishing. Others honestly search, but they doubt whether anyone can properly understand God's message as communicated through his Word. To grapple with these difficulties, we must understand more clearly what God is like. This is what we will discuss in chapter 4.

88 Deuteronomy 6:4–8, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.”
89 Ephesians 4:15, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ”; Ephesians 4:25, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another”; James 1:26, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”; James 1:26, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.”
90 John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”
91 John 14:6, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’”; Acts 4:12, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”