



The Faith

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CONTENTS

Preface / 9

Prologue / 13

PART I

GOD AND THE FAITH

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

PART II

THE FAITH AND LIFE

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

Notes / 227

With Gratitude / 236

Appendix: The Faith Given Once for All / 238

Index / 241

PREFACE

[I] urge you to contend for the truth that was once for all entrusted to the saints. —*Jude 3*

Would you give your life for a cause you didn't fully understand? Would you try to convince someone else to join you? No, neither would I. Which is why I decided to write this book and invited Harold Fickett to join me.

Most professing Christians don't know what they believe, and so can neither understand nor defend the Christian faith—much less live it. Many of the things we tell nonbelievers do not represent real Christianity. And most nonbelievers draw their impressions of the Christian faith from the stereotypes and caricatures that popular culture produces.

When I told friends that I wanted to write an accessible book that would summarize in about 240 pages the basic truths of Christianity, several thought it would be impossible—too big a subject, they said, not to mention the theological minefields. And still others thought no one would be interested in dusty doctrine and history. But the past not only shapes the present; it can also show us the future. We can see much more and further ahead by standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

So this book is about the faith that was “once for all entrusted to the saints”—those essentials that all true Christians have always believed, what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity.” In one sense, there is nothing new here; nothing that is not found in Scripture and in our creeds, which reflect the apostolic teaching—or cannot be

reasoned out from the Scripture as we try to understand today's world. And yet, what is here is new — ever new — because it is eternal.

We have written this book with the deep conviction that this is what people need to defend and live the Christian faith in the midst of the extraordinary challenges of our time.

This book reflects the most profound influences on my life, starting with C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, which was hugely influential in my own conversion. We also draw upon Dorothy Sayers' classic *Creed or Chaos*, and the signature book of the great Christian statesman and abolitionist William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*.

Other authors whose work has profoundly influenced me: the various and highly accessible writings of John Stott, like *Basic Christianity*; the work of J. Gresham Machen who, seventy-five years ago, courageously defended the faith in a great book entitled *Christianity and Liberalism*. Many arguments you will see come as well from G. K. Chesterton, particularly his book *Orthodoxy*; and the works of Abraham Kuyper and Francis Schaeffer, whose writings shaped my theology and worldview.

I have drawn from Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, which has been a handbook for me for years, and now, in more recent years, the *Systematic Theology* of Thomas Oden, an extraordinarily helpful understanding of the patristic era, when the teaching of the apostles was freshest in mind. From more modern times you will see the influence of Rodney Stark, a great sociologist who began as a skeptic and ended up as a believer, and Timothy George, Jim Packer, Neal Plantinga, and Richard Neuhaus.

The cover has proven provocative to early readers. There is a door by which all humans pass from darkness into the light. The way through it is narrow, the Doorkeeper tells us, but He promises to open the door and welcome us into His light. For He is the light by which everything else is enlightened, which is why the Christian faith is attractive and inviting; far from an imposition, the faith is the world's great hope.

You will note that the door is still open, but just ajar. Western culture is doing everything in its power to shut that door. But the Doorkeeper (who is the Door) will never allow it to be fully shut.

He invites you to pass through it.

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
—*John 8:12*

PROLOGUE

In Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, love would have to prove stronger than death.

On the morning of October 5, 2006, twenty-five children were studying in the local one-room schoolhouse, a barnlike structure with a simple bell tower and a front porch supported by steel rods. The building, as plain as notebook paper, reflected the values of the Amish community that educated its children there. The Amish trace their lineage back to pacifist Swiss Christian communities, who, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, renounced the trappings of worldliness.

On that morning, in the midst of the Amish, the worst of the world's madness appeared. At 9:51 a.m., Charles Carl Roberts IV, a thirty-two-year-old milkman, burst into the West Nickel Mines Amish schoolhouse and shattered the community's serenity. He had thought about the violence he was about to perpetrate long in advance, and he came prepared. He carried a 12-gauge shotgun, a 9 mm handgun, a .30-06 bolt-action rifle, about six hundred rounds of ammunition, a stun gun, and two knives. He also had tools and building supplies with him.

He ordered the young girls to line up quickly in front of the chalkboard. Then he demanded that the teacher, Emma Mae Zook, take her fifteen male students, a pregnant woman, and three mothers with infants outside. Once they were gone, Charles Roberts used the tools and the 2 x 6 and 2 x 4 foot boards he was carrying to barricade himself inside. Next, he used flex ties to bind the hands and legs of the young girls, who ranged in age from six to thirteen.

Evidently, he meant to take his time. He called his wife on a cell phone to confess, in partial explanation of the suicide notes he had left at home, that he had molested two young relatives twenty years before. This tale seems to have been a delusion. He also spoke of his grief at the death of an infant daughter. When the Amish girls asked Roberts why he meant to hurt them, he said he was angry at God.

The community responded more quickly than Roberts may have anticipated, and the schoolgirls themselves would alter his plans. Roberts's plan to molest the girls seems apparent from the lubricant he was carrying, but their teacher, Emma Mae Zook, ran to a neighboring farmhouse and called the police at 10:36 a.m. The police arrived in force nine minutes later. From the loudspeakers on their cruisers they spoke to Roberts. He responded that if the grounds weren't cleared in two seconds he'd kill everyone.

The oldest of the girls, Marian Fisher, spoke up. The Amish speak Swiss German as their mother tongue, but she used the best English she could muster. She pleaded, "Shoot me and leave the others one's loose." Marian's eleven-year-old sister, Barbie, asked to be next. They demonstrated the greatest love a human possibly could.

Unnerved by the girls' courage and the police, Roberts tried to execute all ten girls, pouring bullets into them as fast as he could.

At the sound of gunfire the police rushed the building. With one final blast, Roberts committed suicide before they could reach him.

Although Roberts shot all ten children at point-blank range, and several of them repeatedly, he did not fully exact the revenge against God he had planned. Five children survived. Marian's sister, Barbie, was one of them, which is why we know some of the details of what happened inside the schoolhouse that horrible day.

Charles Roberts's death seemed sad only in that he was no longer available to prosecute.

But that's where this story turns in an unexpected direction. The entire Amish community followed young Marian Fisher's lead of sacrifice and love of one's neighbor. While Charles Roberts chose to unleash his anger on the innocent, the Amish chose to bestow forgiveness on the guilty. Newsreel footage showed the Amish horse-and-buggy cortege rolling along the main road in Nickel Mines on

their way to the funerals of the slain children. It was a poignant and picturesque scene. But the images that stayed in the imagination were of Amish men and women attending Charles Roberts's funeral in the graveyard of his wife's Methodist church. They insisted it was not their place to judge him. Amish leaders even asked their community to refrain from thinking of Roberts as evil.

The Amish also reached out to Marie Roberts and her children. They invited the family to attend the girls' funerals—for the Bible says to mourn with those who mourn, and the Roberts family was mourning their own loss. As money poured in to address the medical bills of the wounded girls, Amish community leaders stipulated that a fund be set up from these resources to take care of the killer's widow and three children.

Christians practiced the same inexplicable sacrifice and love in Roman times. Catastrophic events were far more common in the ancient world than in our own. The ancient city of Antioch, for example, suffered forty-one natural and social catastrophes during Roman rule—an average of one every fifteen years.¹ Riots, floods, earthquakes, fires, military sieges, and plagues constantly threatened to wipe the centers of Roman civilization off the map.

In size, most Roman cities were little more than urban postage stamps. Most people lived in multistory tenements, divided like rabbit warrens into one-room apartments. Every household had an open fire for cooking, and whole city blocks often went up in flames like so much kindling. The filth of chamber pots often rained down on the public thoroughfares, as the records of public citation attest.

With sewage in the streets, the air smoke filled, and the incredible crowding—at a time when soap was not yet used—the cities of ancient Rome were perfect cultures for communicable diseases. Plagues in Roman times sealed the fates of 30 to 40 percent of a city's inhabitants. At the onset of plague, the wealthy fled to their country estates. Paganism didn't teach that human life was sacred.

The growing number of people who called themselves Christian, however, believed that each human being was made in the image of

a loving God. The Christians' God expected that His followers would acknowledge His love by sacrificing themselves for others. They were to extend God's love not merely to their families and friends but to their enemies as well. "Love one another" became their standard.

Imagine a young Christian — we'll call him Fortunus — living in one of Rome's deathtrap cities in AD 166, at the time of the first great plague, which was probably smallpox.

In the street, Fortunus meets a fellow believer, Crispus, and together they pull a hand-drawn cart toward the fountain at the city's center. The place is usually alive at this early hour, neighbors calling out to one another from tenement windows, shops opening up, and the streets rumbling with heavy carts bearing wares. But now it remains quiet except for Fortunus's own cart's creak and clatter and the intermittent wails of plague victims in the apartments overhead, which make the chill of the morning that much colder and each step harder.

The fountain is the last place the diseased and dying can go for water, once their neighbors and families notice their illness and abandon them, as was the common practice. There Fortunus and Crispus find another twenty plague victims, many lying on the ground, their clothes bloodied by the hemorrhaging pustules brought on by the disease's first phase. Others are already dead. The two Christians load those who cannot walk into their cart and encourage those who can to come along. Later that morning Fortunus and Crispus will come back for those who have already died and see that they are properly buried.

Their city's Roman garrison probably had a hospital, complete with an isolation ward for cases of communicable diseases like smallpox, but this was only for Roman soldiers and would have been unavailable to Christians. Fortunus and Crispus take the plague victims to the house of a wealthier member of their community. Smallpox causes high fever, headache, back and stomach pain, along with vomiting. After these flulike symptoms comes the pox, white-jellied, running sores that spread in a polka-dot pattern over the face, down the throat, into the eyes, and over the hands and feet. There would have been little for the ancient Christians to do but give the victims water, keep them as clean as possible, and encourage them with kindness and prayer.

Fortunus, who had left his wife and children at home that morning so he could spend the day carting victims to makeshift hospitals and trying to ease their pain, knew that his care for the ill would probably end his own life. Every time he looked into the pocked face of a victim, he was looking into the face of death.

The care Christians showed often did result in their succumbing to the plague themselves. But paradoxically, their compassion did not deplete Christian ranks in the long term—quite the reverse. Tending to the sick increased the disease survival rate by as much as two-thirds,² and this witness attracted many new converts. By acting on the teachings of Christ, without regard to their own welfare, these Christians, against all expectations, progressed from being a small sect to the dominant cultural group.

The unprecedented teachings of Christianity gave people a reason to care for the sick and destitute. Only Jesus taught that His followers could find Him in their neighbor. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, and I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . . I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:35, 40). People who saw Christians behave this way were amazed.

Just as we are amazed at the forgiving example of the Amish. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). In the tragic case of their slaughtered children, the Amish were practicing the love *every* Christian ought to practice.

In one way, we should wonder why the forgiveness of the Amish surprises anyone. It’s nothing but the Gospel, although admittedly an all-too-rare instance of its full practice. But why don’t Christianity’s bitter critics understand that the practice of love and forgiveness are hallmarks of Christianity, *real* Christianity? Because we Christians do not truly understand the tenets of our faith and therefore cannot live the faith.

When we do, as we shall see, we are called to the most exciting adventure imaginable. God wants to make us new creations in Christ. That means joining Christ in His work in the world. So the skeptics will understand—that *real* Christianity is no threat but a glorious proposal.

EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS, BY ALL

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

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

Christianity—The Enduring Truth

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

To our surprise, an Anglican Mass was being celebrated at the high altar and, interestingly, broadcast over the loudspeakers. Most of the

sightseers regarded it as little more than elevator music. But we made our way to a back pew and sat among perhaps a hundred other worshipers.

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

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

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

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

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

some unsuspected likenesses. Only through Christianity, I believe, can Western Europe and America meet these desperate challenges.

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

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

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

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

Next, our time-traveler visits Christians about the time of the Council of Nicea in AD 325. These Christians are no longer Jewish but drawn from all over the Mediterranean world. Many of the leaders now practice celibacy. They are familiar with the ancient Jewish Scriptures but give equal value to writings that have been generated by their own community—the "New Testament." The subject of their discussion centers, as did the first community's, on the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Culturally, these two Christian communities are already worlds apart.

Our time-traveler then visits Irish monks of the sixth century. They practice such spiritual disciplines as fasting and praying for long hours with their arms outstretched in the form of a cross. They are otherworldly in a way the first two communities were not, but they have the same evangelical zeal; they want those near and far to understand Jesus' significance as the Messiah. Some of their members are about to depart for the Scottish coast in tubby leather and wood boats, where they will call the Scottish clans to exchange their nature worship and bloody practices for the joys of heaven.

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

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

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

Surprising historical connections among these groups come to mind as well—those activist English missionaries first brought the faith to the dancing Nigerians, for example. (Today, in a fitting reversal, these Nigerians and other peoples of the Global South are bringing the faith back to the West.) The Jews evangelized the Medi-

terranean Gentiles, from whom both Ireland and England received the faith. All five groups, despite cultural appearances, are part of the same legacy: the one Lord, one faith, one baptism they profess holds true for all.

Right Belief and Today's Confusion

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

Surveying the press coverage over the last couple of years makes it clear that Christianity is reeling from a bruising and perhaps unprecedented attack by aggressive atheism—or what one critic ominously calls “anti-theism.” In 2006, Richard Dawkins, a clever and articulate Oxford evolutionary biologist, published *The God Delusion*, which took up near-permanent residence on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Dawkins considers religious instruction a form of child abuse and suggests that governments should put a stop to it. Tufts professor Daniel Dennett argues that religion is a dangerous toxin that may be poisoning believers. Similar books have appeared from Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*) and the brilliant if caustic Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*). The title of Chris Hedges’ *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* could hardly be more direct. Regularly, critics liken politically active Christians to the Taliban.²

This is not a fringe phenomenon. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, these authors sold close to a million books in one twelve-month period alone.³ Richard Dawkins, responsible for half of those sales, can attest to how lucrative attacking God has become. These critics say we are trying to “impose” our views on American life—that we want to create a “theocracy,” or a government run by the Church. But this is absurd; theocracy is contrary to the most basic Christian teaching about free will and human freedom. Christianity gave the

very idea of separation of Church and state to the West. And Christianity advances not by power or by conquest, but by love.⁴

Postmodernism and the Death of Truth

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

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

President Eisenhower, a great father figure of the post–World War II era, perfectly captured this spirit of the postwar age: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is.”⁵ In 2007, an Episcopal priest carried this view so far she became a Muslim and remained a priest, while publicly denying there was any inconsistency.⁶

All the while, those making their truth claims are publicly demeaned with impunity. Christians are called “wing nuts” and “flat-earthers,” or as one major national paper famously put it: “Poor, uneducated, and easily led.”⁷

Clash of Civilizations

Even as we provide a reasoned defense against postmodernist disbelief, we must renew our culture—the only true remedy to radical Islam's aggression.

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

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

Challenge for the Church

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

Tragically, postmodern culture has infected and weakened the Church, particularly in the West. Spain, once the most Catholic country in Europe, has become, within a generation, among the most secularized. A recent report among Spain’s bishops lays the blame squarely on heretical teaching as to the nature of Christ and His atoning work. Likewise, when I asked a priest friend why church

membership was declining so rapidly in once rigidly Catholic Ireland, he answered, “Because the priests don’t preach the Gospel.”

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

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

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

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

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

From the Beginning: Mere Christianity

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

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

Centuries of Christian reflection and public debate have produced classic and lesser creeds that all say much the same. From the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed forward, the words differ little when addressing the great articles of faith. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession begins by explicitly citing the ancient Nicene Creed.¹⁰

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

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

Where we come from tells us who we are, and so it is in the Church. A fifth-century monk for Gaul, St. Vincent of Lerins,

famously counseled: “Hold fast that faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.”



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

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