



The Anchor Course

Exploring Christianity Together

Tom Goodman

The Introduction
&
Part Two: “I Believe in God”

© 2006
Tom Goodman
All rights reserved

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Scriptures marked (CEV) are from the *Contemporary English Version*, copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Scriptures marked (NLT) are from the Holy Bible, *New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Scriptures marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible* Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Scriptures marked (LB) are from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1979 by Tyndale House Publishers. Scriptures marked (Msg) are from *The Message* Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. Scriptures marked (NCV) are from the Holy Bible, *New Century Version*, copyright © 1991 by Word Bibles. Scriptures marked (TEV) are from *Today's English Version* (also called *Good News Translation*), copyright © 1992 from the American Bible Society. Scriptures marked (NKJV) are from the Holy Bible, *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Scriptures marked (Phillips) are from the *New Testament in Modern English* by J.B. Phillips, copyright © 1958 by Macmillan. Scriptures marked (HCSB) are from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Scriptures marked (ESV) are from the Holy Bible, *English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006906541

ISBN: 978-1-84728-143-2

Printed in the United States of America

Introduction

He was friendly, but blunt. “My friend gave me this because I was asking him a lot of questions about Jesus,” he said, holding up a copy of the Gospel of John. “You expect a lot when the first thing I’m supposed to believe is that Jesus turned water into wine.”

That was my introduction to Terry, a Canadian businessman with a practical mind who had begun to explore the Christian faith. He was referring to a Bible story of Jesus transforming pots of water into wine at a first-century wedding feast.

Terry and I began to meet at his house, along with his wife, Susan, and a few others who wanted to understand what Christ-followers believed. One evening a week, we would sit in his family room or around the magnificent kitchen table he had built, and we would discuss my Christian faith. As the weekly meetings progressed, clearly what the group was looking for was more than the *rationale* for the things I believed; they wanted the *relevance*. Fifteen proofs that the resurrection really happened, for example, wouldn’t be enough. The “so what” question had to be answered: what difference did my belief in the resurrection make in my life?

Terry and Susan became believers through those evening chats, and even though we no longer live in the same community, we still keep up with each other.

The book you're holding is the result of my conversations with Terry's family and friends. I'm hoping that those who believe and those who are still spiritual explorers will benefit from my thoughts. More than that, this book was designed to bring believers and explorers *together* for the kind of conversations that took place at Terry's house.

Better Together

In her time, she was popular culture's most famous atheist. Life magazine once called her the most hated woman in America, and she seemed to relish the regard. Yet a poignant plea interrupted the diary entries of Madalyn Murray O'Hair:

“Somebody,
somewhere,
love me.”

Behind her public hostility to anything related to religion was a thirsty soul. In her diary, she privately longed for a real connection to someone. She wanted to be appreciated, cherished, and understood—in a word, *loved*.

Too bad that most of the believers she mocked easily confirmed her hostile prejudices. The angry faces and protest signs that met her at public appearances and the hate mail she received at home did nothing to change her mind about those who embraced the faith she ridiculed.

Thankfully, the chasm between those who are curious about Christ and those who believe in him is rarely so wide. Among those who have not expressed a commitment to Christ, very few would identify with either the atheism or the antagonism of O'Hair. And, unlike the Christians O'Hair encountered, few Christ-followers have ever acted so rudely to those who don't embrace the faith.

But the alternative too many believers and seekers have chosen isn't helpful either. In many cases, those who believe in Christ and those who are curious about him have chosen to simply co-

exist. In our office break rooms and at our family reunions and on the sidelines of our kids' soccer games we do nothing more with each other than share space. We chat—if we talk at all—about the newspaper headlines or the progress of our college team or the prospects for a break in the weather we're having. It's as if we're afraid to let our conversation cross into the territory of belief. Some of us are fearful that the peaceful co-existence would come to an end if people of faith actually talked about what they believed or if explorers asked honest questions about why anyone would believe that.

As a result of this concern, most believers and spiritual explorers make assumptions *about* each other instead of having conversations *with* each other. This book is written so that the kind of conversations I had at Terry's house can happen in your world, too. I want this book to kindle conversations between seekers who want to *explore* the Christian faith and believers who want to *explain* it. Even if you found this book while browsing alone in a bookstore or a library, I hope you won't read it alone. It's designed to bring together those who are curious about Christ and those who believe in him.

The Basics

A conversation about the Christian faith needs to cover some basic convictions. We need to talk together about what Christ-followers believe about God and his relationship to us. We need to talk about the life and death and resurrection and return of Jesus. We need to talk about Christ's vision for his church, especially since believers have been so imperfect at making that vision a reality. We need to talk about heaven and hell. We need to talk about the meaning of the cross, which stands as the most recognizable symbol of the Christian faith.

To cover all these bases, this book is organized around an ancient statement of faith recited by millions around the world and down through the centuries. It's known as the Apostles' Creed. The words transcend denominational differences and cultural distinctions to summarize what believers have always embraced:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the one holy church;¹
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting.*

Amen.

Here we have a summary of what was taught by those Christ chose as his apostles. In fact, this is why it is called the *Apostles' Creed*. They did not write it, despite the old legend that the Apostles each contributed a point. Few ever took that legend seriously; instead, the Creed dates back to at least the early third century and it was used as a confession that new believers recited before baptism. So, we call it the *Apostles' Creed* because it summarizes what we find in the *Apostles' writings—the Bible*. Every line in the Creed is either an echo or an actual quote of Scripture.

According to the Bible, one of the characteristics of the first believers was that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). So, the best way to discuss Christian faith with each other is to organize it around what the apostles taught. In this book, the points of the Creed will serve as touchstones for conversations over the basics of what Christ-followers believe. We’ll cover eight topics in the order that we find them in the ancient Creed:

- “I Believe”—We’ll look at the benefits and the barriers to belief, and the role the Bible plays in Christian faith.
- “I Believe in God”—We’ll look at the evidence for God and the three most important things to know about who he is.
- “I Believe in Jesus”—We’ll look at the claims Jesus made about himself and his promise to return.
- “I Believe in the Holy Spirit”—We’ll look at the active role God plays in our world today.
- “I Believe in the Church”—We’ll look at Christ’s vision for the gathering of believers he called his church. Neither our spiritual search nor our spiritual growth should take place on our own.
- “I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins”—We’ll look at the way our sins have separated us from God, and we’ll look at how God commissioned the death of Jesus on the cross to remove the record of our sins.
- “I Believe in Eternal Life”—We’ll look at what Christ-followers believe about the resurrection, heaven and hell.
- “Amen”—The word “amen” is a Hebrew word that means, “it is so . . . this is true . . . I buy that.” We’ll look at the things that make people hesitate at the edge of Christian commitment, and the steps you need to take when you’re ready to cross the line into faith.

We’ll devote a few chapters to each of these topics. If you decide to use this book to discuss the Christian faith with others, I’ve provided some discussion questions at the end of the book.

Making Me

The late singer-songwriter, Rich Mullins, set the Apostles Creed to music in his award-winning song, *Creed*. He occasionally broke into the flow of the ancient lines to sing, “I did not make it . . . it is making me.”²

I like that line. In the end, this book is about what makes us. Whether we’re committed to Christ or just curious about him,

we all operate out of a set of assumptions about the way the world is, such as:

“If I do good things, then good things will happen to me.”

“The only person you can count on is yourself.”

“Life is a dressing room for eternity.”

“God likes me.”

“God hates me.”

We make our decisions and respond to circumstances out of the assumptions we hold. As Mullins sang, what we believe makes us what we are. This book, and your conversations with others about this book, will give you a chance to examine the beliefs that drive your life.

Now, I confess I’m not neutral in my hopes of where such an inspection will lead you, whether you are a believer or a spiritual explorer. If you are exploring Christianity, I hope your experience with this book will help you trade in your way of looking at the world for the way Jesus looked at things. On the other hand, if you are already committed to Christ, I hope your time in this book will help you operate more consistently out of the beliefs you hold. I have yet to meet a believer who was a “finished product.” Mullins said the Creed was *making* him, and that implies a work still underway. Even as believers, we need reminders of the freedom of living in God’s grace, the power of living by God’s Spirit, the encouragement of living with God’s people, and the hope of living for God’s eternal kingdom.

In short, God isn’t finished with any of us yet—whether we are believers or spiritual explorers. I hope this book will be part of *beginning* or *building* a relationship with God.

Be sure to check out my website at www.anchorcourse.org. There you will find more information about *The Anchor Course*, as well as additional articles and links for further study of the topics covered in this book.

Part Two: “I Believe in God”

*I believe
in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, dead, and buried.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
 He ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
 From there he shall come
 to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit;
 the one holy church;
 the communion of saints;
 the forgiveness of sins;
 the resurrection of the body;
 and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

Chapter 5

Don't Ignore the Evidence for God

When believers say, “I believe in God,” they mean more than simply, “I believe God exists.” To “believe in” God means to rely on his leadership and to trust him to provide all that we need. Still, acknowledging the existence of a personal Supreme Being of willpower and creativity is a big step for some, so let’s begin there.

It’s interesting that the Bible never lists “proofs” for God’s existence. Jesus gave evidence for his unique relationship to God and the apostles and prophets gave proof that they spoke for God. But apparently the Bible’s writers considered that God’s “existence” simply was not a proposition needing proof. We read in Scripture that the world around us reveals not only God’s existence but also a measure of his character and expectations. The Old Testament poet put it this way (Psalms 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 display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Though the natural world can't give people a *complete* picture of God, it gives people a *sufficient* picture of God to draw some conclusions. In Scripture, we are told that evidence for God from the natural world is so obvious that people have to suppress it in order to ignore it.

The Apostle Paul wrote (Romans 1:18-20):

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

If the evidence from the world around us is so obvious, what signs of God's existence are non-believers overlooking? To come to the point where you can say, "I believe in the existence of God," there are at least five realities to stop ignoring.

Stop Ignoring the Reality of Cause and Effect

At every birthday party, you celebrate a beginning. Small children are often amazed to find out that their parents were once babies. As we grow and mature, we see that the world around us also is essentially a cycle of beginnings and endings, a process of cause and effect. If we look at this process logically, we can see that everything in the universe came from some prior cause. We can conclude that ultimately, there must have been a first "cause" that got everything started. And since, according to our most recent knowledge, matter could not have brought itself into existence, something or someone independent of this physical world must have launched the entire process. What caused the birth of the universe?

This idea that the universe had a beginning was nothing more than speculation and religious conviction until scientists in the twentieth century began to make some discoveries. Telescopes aimed at the sky revealed what scientists concluded were galax-

ies moving away from us at high speeds, as if everything had come from a point of origin and was now expanding like an inflating balloon or an explosion. One early critic derisively labeled this interpretation “the big bang,” and the term stuck. Scientists did not easily give up the concept that the universe was infinite and unlimited, but the evidence kept mounting. From Edwin Hubble’s research in the early 1900s to the results from the Cosmic Background Explorer (COBE) satellite of the late 1900s, it seemed inevitable that the universe had a beginning.¹ If it had a beginning, then it makes sense to ask if there is a Beginner behind the beginning. Science is making it easier to say, “Of course.”

Stop Ignoring the Evidence of Design

Scientists have marveled at how the universe “burst” from its point of origin in such a way that made human life inevitable. Freeman Dyson wrote, “The more I examine the universe and the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known we were coming.”²

To what “details” is he referring? It seems that the fundamental physical laws that eventually made life possible were in place within a small fraction of the first second of its big-bang beginning. Scientists have identified more than a hundred parameters required for life to develop, and more are being discovered. John Leslie compiled a large number of these parameters in his book, *Universes*.³ If any of these constants, values and relationships in nature had been even slightly different, you and I would not be around to comment on them.

It seems that someone went to a lot of trouble to get the universe ready for us. The name for this perspective is the “anthropic principle,” a term derived from the Greek word, *anthropos*, which means “man.” This principle states that the universe was apparently fine-tuned from the very start to make human life possible. As Patrick Glynn wrote in the *New York Times* bestselling autobiography of his spiritual search:

What twentieth century cosmology had come up with was something of a scientific embarrassment: a universe with a definite beginning, expressly designed for life. Ironically, the picture of the universe bequeathed to us by the most advanced twentieth-century science is closer in spirit to the vision presented in the Book of Genesis than anything offered by science since Copernicus.⁴

Evidence for design exists not only in the field of physics but also biology. For nearly two hundred years, this field of science has maintained that all life came about through natural selection, a process of numerous, successive, slight modifications over many years. Its main flaw, however, is that it does not take into account the presence of key elements required to make such select systems work.

These elements are at the root of an intriguing new theory that challenges natural selection as a comprehensive explanation for life. Some scientists are now concluding that at every level of existence, there are systems of *irreducible complexity*. This is a phrase that biochemist Michael Behe first used to describe systems that require several components to function.⁵

Behe's favorite analogy of irreducible complexity is a mouse-trap. A common mousetrap requires several components to function properly: a wooden base, a hammer, a spring to provide force for the hammer, a catch to activate trap, and a bar between the catch and the hammer to set the trap. All of these components have to exist and be set in the right relationship to each other (by a person who is designing it) before they are of any use at catching mice. In nature, numerous systems are like this. Even at the cellular level, many components combine to enable the cell to perform. According to the theory of natural selection, impersonal processes are biased toward systems that are already working and would have had no use for these components prior to their interaction with each other. So, the existence of these irreducibly complex systems challenges evolution as a comprehensive explanation of life.

Thankfully, there is a growing body of credentialed scientists speaking in the language of their various fields to point out evidence for intelligent design. Most of us, however, come to the same conclusion in more intuitive ways. For example, a medical doctor once told his story of how his agnosticism broke down while he held his newborn daughter. Such moments are reverent, as any parent will admit. The baby lay sleeping in her physician-father's arms, and he was admiring the little wonder. Her tiny ear caught his attention, and he marveled at its intricacy—the way it was curved to catch sounds and direct them to the protected eardrum. He knew that inside there were microscopic hairs that would interpret the sounds to the brain. The moment overwhelmed him and the realization broke in: “There *must* be an intelligent power behind the universe.” At that point, he had not drawn any conclusions about Christ (that came later); but he quit suppressing the truth about the existence of God.

Stop Ignoring Your Awareness of Right and Wrong

No matter the cultural background, selfishness is not lifted up as an admirable quality. Nor are actions such as incest, theft, murder, or abandoning responsibilities. In short, there is a universal acknowledgement that we should be ashamed of certain behaviors. This sense of what we “ought” or “ought not” to do is a bright sign pointing to our origin in God. Where do we get the idea, for example, that prison guards at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib compound “shouldn’t” use the humiliation of human beings for the guards’ personal enjoyment? Or that an uncle “shouldn’t” sexually exploit his little niece or nephew? Or that someone “shouldn’t” slip into our parking spot after we politely waited and provided room for a departing car to back out? Admitting that we have a sense of what is right and wrong can lead us to acknowledge a Lawgiver.

All too often, however, this idea of the way things “should” be is one of the most persistent objections against the existence of God. How many times have you heard someone say, “Well, if there is a god, why do so many bad things happen to the innocent? Why would a good god allow pain and suffering?”

While these protests seem valid and understandable on the surface, they are actually strong arguments for the reality of the divine. You see, these questions are questions of justice—we observe something that is not right and seek to correct it or cast blame. But what makes us see some act as unjust in the first place? Where did our definition of unjust and just originate? To call a stick crooked, you have to have in mind what a straight stick looks like. To complain that life is *unfair*, you have to have some idea of the way things *ought* to be in the universe. If human life is just an accidental byproduct of blind natural selection, then our moral outrage at its mishaps is nothing less than irrational. The fact that we feel a sense of outrage at injustice actually points to the existence of God.

Stop Ignoring Your Sense of Self

Biologist and philosopher Leon Kass remembers standing at the bedside of a brilliant man he deeply respected just moments after the man's death. He said:

One day I went to visit him in the hospital, as I'd done a number of times before. On the way into the room, I asked the nurse, who was coming out, how he was doing. She said, "Didn't you know? He died about an hour ago." I walked into the room, and there he was, lying in bed, very peaceful. Had I not been told by the nurse, I would have assumed he was asleep. I don't really know what happened in the next few moments, but I found myself on my knees at the end of the bed. I was thunderstruck. Here he was, but he wasn't there at all. There was almost a smile on his face. All I could think of was—where is he? Where is this mind? What's happened to him?⁶

Kass had a sense that there was more to his friend than simply the now-lifeless muscles, bones and tissue in the bed. Many of us have had that same sensation as we stand next to the lifeless body of a loved one.

While some would say that such feelings are merely sentimentalism, the research into what makes you "you" is raising some of

the strongest challenges against the naturalistic explanations for life. Where do you get your sense of self—your introspection, feelings, hopes, and subjective viewpoint? Advocates of naturalistic explanations would say that self-consciousness is merely the product of highly-evolved brains, which one MIT professor famously called “computers made of meat.”⁷

Is the brain alone sufficient to account for our sense of self? Scientists have researched the stubborn human conviction that there’s a nonmaterial reality called the “soul,” or “self,” or “mind.” One neurosurgeon found when working with epilepsy patients that by stimulating certain parts of the brain he could make the patients swallow or blink or turn their heads. In every case, however, the patients would say, “I didn’t do that; you did.” The patients knew they had a separate existence from whatever was happening to their bodies. The neurosurgeon added that there was no place in the brain where electrical stimulation could make a patient believe or decide, and thus these mental actions had to originate in something other than simply the physical brain.⁸

Recent studies in a field called *neurotheology* seem to contradict that last statement. Proponents claim that there’s a physical basis for religious thoughts—our minds are “wired” for God, as one book puts it. But instead of assuming that electrical impulses in a portion of the brain generate what we call consciousness of God, couldn’t it be the other way around? It’s just as likely that our consciousness of God impacts the activity of our brain.⁹

Certainly, no one argues against a *correlation* between the brain and the sense of self. But the research calls into question *causation*—it’s not conclusive that the brain *causes* consciousness. One person likened the relationship between the brain and the mind to the way a television set manifests pictures and sounds from waves in the air.¹⁰ There is a connection between the television set and the waves it turns into pictures and sounds, but the waves exist independently of the TV. Research continues to run into signs that the immaterial mind or soul exists independently of the material brain. These indicators lead us toward a creator

who is personal, purposeful, and creative himself. We are, the Bible says, made in his image (Genesis 1:26).

Stop Ignoring Your Innate Impression of Permanence

The Bible says God has “planted eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Even if we had very little religious training, we intuitively know that life cannot end here. After some sixty to eighty years of laughing, hoping, dreaming, crying, relating, exploring the “what” of existence through engineering and the sciences, examining the “why” of existence through philosophy and the arts—after all this, are we to become nothing more than decaying fertilizer in the ground? We have eternity in our hearts, and our hearts tell us there’s more to life than this life.

Go Fish

People have to ignore a lot in order to deny that a personal God exists: the reality of cause and effect, the evidence for design, our awareness of right and wrong, our sense of self, and our stubborn impression of permanence. The evidence for God is so clear that the Old Testament poet observed, “Only fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’” (Psalms 14:1 NLT). If a man casts a line on a lake all day and fails to catch fish, does that prove there are no fish to catch, or does it prove that he is an inept fisherman?¹¹

Chapter 6

Clear Up Your Misunderstandings of God

When our first child turned four, it was time for him to start sitting with his mother in church services instead of attending the preschool care. After a few weeks of observing the hour-long services of songs, prayers, and my teaching, he told me at lunch, “I know what your job is, Daddy.”

“Oh?”

“Your job is to tell people about God.”

“Well, that’s right, son. I’m a pastor, and my job is to tell people about God.”

“Daddy?” he continued.

“Yes, son.”

“It takes a lo-o-o-o-ong time to tell people about God, doesn’t it, Daddy?”

Well, I guess it does; there’s a lot to say about God. The Apostles’ Creed, though, summarizes the Bible’s teaching about the nature of God in just three statements: he is “God the Father,” “Almighty,” and “Maker of heaven and earth.” In the last chapter we looked at some reasons to believe in the existence of God, but

Christian belief involves more than merely believing in the reality of a Supreme Being. It involves certain convictions about the nature of God: He is our Father, our Ruler, and our Creator.

These three statements challenge some popular misunderstandings of God. Some people look upon God as a tyrant whom we must constantly calm with unpleasant acts of sacrifice. By contrast, others see God as an indulgent grandfather figure that grants our every request and overlooks our bad behavior. Some people see him as a spoiler, sort of like a cop forever in our rear-view mirror. Still others understand “God” as the impersonal life force that animates the universe. In contrast to the various ways people perceive God today, the believer says, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Let’s look at those three statements, starting with the last one first.

“God is my Maker”

The first line of the Bible tells us, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). This conviction has a personal impact and a cosmic impact. Personally, the fact that God made *me* tells me how valuable I am. I am not an accidental by-product of an impersonal evolutionary process; the Bible says I am “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14) and therefore God intended me to be part of this epic adventure of his.

God made *me*, and that tells me how valuable I am; on a much larger scale, God made *everything*, and that tells me that I am just one part of a vast epic adventure that God is directing. In the 1976 film, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Luke Skywalker was introduced to the concept of “the Force.” His mentor, the Jedi knight Obi-wan Kenobi, explained that the Force was that which animated all things and bound them all together. Remarkable feats could be accomplished, he told young Skywalker, by letting the Force flow through him. But, he warned, “beware the dark side of the Force.”

Although Obiwan’s view of “God” was new to many American moviegoers in 1976, it’s an ancient and persistent view called *pantheism*. “Pan” is a Greek word that means “all,” and pantheism is

the belief that everything is God. It contends that rocks, trees, spiders, planets, and people are all simply extensions of the divine. Events in life and even human behavior are manifestations of this force as well. Some events and behavior display the life-affirming side of this animating mind, but there is also a dark side to the force that menaces life and order. Everything we experience is simply the manifestation of the competition of these opposing sides to reality.

By contrast, Christians believe that God is “Maker of heaven and earth.” He made the world but exists apart from it, like an architect who designs a building but exists independently of the building. This view of God is announced from the first book of the Bible to the last. As we have seen, the first line of the Bible speaks of God’s creative act, and in the last book of the Bible we find people praising God because of his creative work (Revelation 4:11):

“You created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

When believers say that God created “all things,” this includes “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities” (Colossians 1:16¹). In other words, God created even the invisible “powers” that shape world events and influence human behavior. Many of these powerful beings are loyal to God, but some have rebelled.

According to pantheism, bad things will *always* be a part of reality because the eternal animating “force” is made up a menacing side as well as a life-affirming side: Yin and Yang, Good and Evil, Light and Darkness . . . forever. While pantheism tries to give us an *explanation* as to why we experience bad things, however, Christianity promises us a *solution*. We look forward to a future without pain and evil because evil only exists as a result of rebellion within the ranks of the visible and invisible beings God has created. In other words, the devil that is described in Scripture is not God’s co-equal evil counterpart. Rather, he is a rebellious created being—a fallen angel. Therefore he and his forces cannot

stop their future final defeat as it is described in the last book of the Bible. That which has been made cannot eternally resist the intentions of the Maker—especially one that is Almighty, which is the second way that God is described in the Apostles' Creed.

“God is my Ruler”

“Almighty” is one of the favorite titles for God in the Bible. In the Old Testament alone, the Hebrew word for “God Almighty,” *El-Shaddai*, shows up 330 times. God rules the world he made.

Now, this conviction impacts life in a lot of ways but let me call attention to two: *how we talk to God*, and *how we live for God*.

How we talk to God. When we want to talk to God in prayer, the fact that he is ruler over all can be intimidating. But it can also be liberating. God is “Almighty,” and so when we pray to him we can be confident that, as the angel said in the Christmas story, “Nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

Of course, if you've ever prayed for something that wasn't granted, or if your heart has ever been broken in a personal tragedy, this conviction that God is “Almighty” is unsettling. Why do tragedies happen if God is all-powerful? In fact, some have tried to resolve the tension between God's rule and life's disappointments by saying that God is not all-powerful. There are things he wants to do for us, some say, but he simply cannot do them.

As for me, I would rather wrestle with the mystery of a God who could have answered my request and did not, than to conclude that God really wants to answer my request and could not. No matter why I face disappointments now, at the end of time I want to stand before a God that is not only good enough to *want* to set everything right but is powerful enough to *be able* to set everything right. He is *El-Shaddai*, God Almighty, and that conviction impacts our prayer life.

How we live for God. If “God is my Ruler,” the second way that reality affects Christians is in the matter of obedience. God says,

“I am the Almighty God. Obey me and always do what is right” (Genesis 17:1 TEV). Believers’ obligation to do what God wants comes from the fact that he is *El-Shaddai*, and it counters the “greeting-card” concept of him that many people hold. In this mindset, God is non-threatening, safe and responsive to our every desire. He has no strong views on our behavior. He opens a parking space when we are late for an appointment, and responds to our failures with an indulgent pat on the head as a reprimand. But if I believe he is my Ruler, I am reminded that my goal should be to honor his intentions for my life. The fact that he rules the world he made means that he has the right to rule my life as well. So, his wish is my command—in my relationships, my business practices, my finances, my forms of entertainment, and my decision-making.

“God is my Father”

The fact that God is my Maker and my Ruler does not complete the biblical picture of God. The remarkable truth of scripture is that my Maker and Ruler is also my Father. I don’t relate to him as a slave relates to a master but rather as an obedient and loyal child relates to a loving father. Some see God as the perpetual spoiler, the constant cop in our rearview mirror. Others envision God as some sort of impossible-to-please tyrant. But the Apostle Paul wrote, “We should not be like cringing, fearful slaves, but we should behave like God’s very own children, adopted into the bosom of his family, and calling to him, ‘Father, Father’” (Romans 8:15 LB). Paul used the tender, intimate Aramaic word “Abba” in that verse, which is closer to our word “Daddy.” In fact, Paul was simply echoing the teaching of Jesus, who made the idea of fatherhood central to his teachings about God.

Some have suggested that this picture of God as Father isn't helpful today

Some have suggested that this picture of God as Father isn’t helpful today because many people have known abusive or neglectful fathers. A bad experience with an earthly father, they

say, could cause some to think of a heavenly Father with revulsion instead of reverence.

It's true that our earliest impression of God is shaped on the anvil of our relationship with an earthly father. That's why fathers are so important in our lives. But, while I don't want to belittle the concern, I think it falls short. To think of God as "Father" does not mean we should see God as fathers *are* but rather as fathers *ought to be*. God relates to us as earthly fathers should.

There is a universal expectation of behavior which earthly fathers try to meet. Earthly fathers ought to be protectors, nurturers, and responsive to the basic needs of their children. God perfectly fulfills that image of the responsive, protective, nurturing father. Many have discovered this, as Barbara Curtis so beautifully described in a magazine article:

I remember the day my dad left. He knelt and hugged me and cried. The skimpy dress of a five-year-old girl could not protect me from the chill that gathered around my arms and legs. The scratchy whiskers—would I feel them no more? The arms that felt so safe—would they be gone forever?

What would it be like not to have a father?

The years to come provided harsh answers to those questions. . . . I guess you might say with no one to believe in, I learned to believe in myself.

Only when this unsustainable strategy dropped me down and out—and more alone than ever—did I finally face my fatherlessness. . . .

So it was in my 30s, sensing a spiritual vacuum, that I finally launched a search for God. . . . How ready I was the moment I first understood that God was my father. At last, I was someone's little girl! To this day, 10 years later, I cannot approach God intellectually, but only as a child and with no reservations. I feel such love. . . .

I remember once, before he left, my father carrying me home in his arms as blood gushed from a jagged cut on my foot. I was four and I was frightened, hoping that my father could take care of me. But though that day he stopped the bleeding, no earthly father could have healed the wounded heart he later left behind.

That hurt cried out for the love of a Heavenly Father. And so I will always be God's grateful little girl—trusting, dependent, and filled with faith in the arms that will never let me go.²

What a world of love, security, and self-worth opens up to us when we discover that God is our Father!

Bragging Rights

God is our Maker, our Ruler, and our Father. How firmly you hold these truths will determine whether you seek the company of God through prayer, Bible study and daily living. Embracing these truths will change the way you handle stress, anxiety and unanswered prayer. It will also impact your sense of personal value, as well as the value you give to “life ethics”—issues like euthanasia, war, abortion, and capital punishment. What you believe about the nature of God will determine if you will live under the awareness that you are accountable to God. These truths about God put limits on the authority human government can claim over us, which explains why totalitarian governments try to stamp out Christianity. In short, you tell me a world about yourself when you say, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”

According to the prophet Jeremiah, God said (9:23-24):

“Let not the wise man boast of his *wisdom*
or the strong man boast of his *strength*
or the rich man boast of his *riches*,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me . . .”

It's not our intelligence, power, or wealth that should fill us with security and wholeness. Many have chased after the first three options only to discover that they cannot completely satisfy. In the passage above, God said, "Let a man boast that he *understands and knows me.*"

Many people say, "I believe in God"—and what they are saying is "I believe that God exists." But our goal should be to *know* God—to have a relationship with him, to "improve our conscious contact with God" as those in recovery groups put it. A.W. Tozer once said, "I want deliberately to encourage this mighty longing after God. . . . He waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us He waits so long, so very long, in vain."³

Notes

Introduction

¹ You may be more familiar with the version of the Apostles' Creed using the line, "I believe in the holy catholic church." The word translated "catholic" (Latin, *catholicam*; Greek, *katholikos*), means "universal," and refers to the universal oneness of all believers. Today, though, most people understand the word "catholic" to refer to a specific branch of Christianity: the Roman Catholic Church. Since a word that once referred to the oneness of *all* Christians is now identified with only a segment of the Christian body, I prefer to simply speak of the church as *one* instead of as *catholic*. We will discuss this in Chapter 14.

² Rich Mullins, "Creed," on *A Liturgy, A Legacy, and a Ragamuffin Band* Audio CD (Nashville: Reunion, 1993). Listeners may be more familiar with this song as covered by Third Day on their 2003 Audio CD, *Offerings*.

Chapter 6: Don't Ignore the Evidence for God

¹ For Hubble's research in the early 1900s and the COBE satellite of the late 1900s, see Patrick Glynn, *God: The Evidence: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World* (Roseville, CA: Prima, 1997), 21–55, and White, *A Search for the Spiritual*, 26–28.

² Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 250.

³ John Leslie, *Universes* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁴ Glynn, *God: The Evidence*, 26.

⁵ Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

⁶ Interview with Leon Kass in Bill Moyers, *A World of Ideas* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 362.

⁷ Attributed to Marvin Minsky in Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 250.

⁸ See Wilder Penfield, *The Mystery of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), 76–77, and Penfield's article, "Control of the Mind" Symposium at the University of California Medical Center, San Francisco, 1961).

⁹ See Kenneth L. Woodward, "Faith is More Than a Feeling," *Newsweek* (May 7, 2001).

¹⁰ Sam Parnia, "Near Death Experiences in Cardiac Arrest and the Mystery of Consciousness," available at www.datadiwan.de/SciMedNet/library/articlesN75+/N76Parnia_ndc.htm (accessed September 21, 2004), quoted in *The Case for a Creator* by Lee Strobel, 251.

¹¹ This analogy was first made by Phillip Bishop in "Evidence of God in Human Physiology—Fearfully and Wonderfully Made," <http://www.leaderu.com/science/bishop.html/>, accessed September 7, 2004. Material for this chapter came from reading the following books: Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Twenty Compelling Evidences That God Exists* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: RiverOak Publishing, 2002); Patrick Glynn, *God: The Evidence: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World* (Roseville, California: Prima Publishing, 1997); Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Chapter 6: Clear Up Your Misunderstandings of God

¹This verse says God made all things "by" and "for" his Son. We'll look at that teaching in a later chapter.

² Barbara Curtiss, "Soul Food," *World*, 13 June 1998, 45.

³ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, available at <http://scott.shanebweb.com/christian/pursuit/tozer3.htm/>, accessed September 30, 2004.