

I. Introduction

A. Twenty-five years ago –back when our oldest son Austin was just a little tike - we lived in Washington. And our next-door neighbors had a son a few years older than Austin, named Josh, who liked to throw all of Austin’s things into a tree in our front yard.

B. Now if you have children you can expect that a few things are going to end up stuck in a tree -- kites and Frisbees and an occasional child. Not because they are trying to get them stuck but because it just happens. But with Josh getting things stuck in the tree was the goal. He was obsessed with it. And it wasn’t just normal things. I’d come home from work and the tree in our front yard would have bats and books and clothes and rakes and pieces of hot wheels track hanging in it. It was not a great look. You name it, if the kid could lift it he was trying to get it stuck in our tree.

C. So it was no surprise one day when Austin came in and said, “Josh threw my baseball glove into the tree.” What I wasn’t ready for was how high up in the tree he got it.

D. And I looked at Josh and said, “Josh, stop throwing Austin’s things into the tree. If you want to throw your things into your tree that’s fine. But don’t throw Austin’s things in our tree. Now how am I supposed to get that down?” It was way too high for a step ladder. And no real way to get an extension ladder to it. It was a small glove surrounded by lots of branches, so I figured I’d be throwing things at it for hours before I hit it. And there was no guarantee that hitting it would knock it down. It was out on a limb so I couldn’t get a big ladder out.

E. While we are looking up the tree Austin – who is about 3 and a half – says. I can get it down. Oh yeah. How’s that?

F. I’ll just fly up there and get it.

G. Oh that’s nice. You’re just going to fly up there and get it.

H. Yeah. But I’ll need to go get my Superfly coat on first. Austin had a gray jacket that he called his Super fly coat. There was nothing special about it. No Superman insignia on it. It didn’t have a cape. It was a simple little hooded winter jacket that he had started calling his “Superfly coat.”

I. And so I said, “OK, yeah. Why don’t you go do that.” And so he runs inside to get his coat.

J. Now there weren’t a lot of people around, but we had friends over and there were some other kids in our yard and word spread pretty quickly that Austin was going to fly so a little crowd started to gather. And soon Austin – it was Spring (not winter coat weather) comes out with this coat on looking very determined. He is there to save the day.

K. And he looks up at the tree. He walks back a few steps, because, he said, “I’m going to need to get started first,” and then he runs and jumps all of about 3 inches. And he looked pretty shocked. As I remember he tried a couple more times before finally giving up. The most remarkable thing about it was that I really think he really believed he was going to fly.

L. Or, to put it another way, if all he needed was faith that he could pull it off, the kid would have been air born.

II. This morning we are going to start a series that will be filling in the cracks around other series in the calendar for a while.

A. It grows out of some of the work I did over my sabbatical back in February, which in turn grew out of my efforts to help a few people new to faith get grounded in the basics. There are lots of books out there for someone who has just stepped over the line. I decided I was looking for something a bit different.

B. And so I started my sabbatical with a goal of writing seven letters that would help someone get a good start. I had a particular man in mind – a guy who attends one of our campuses, who was in his mid-fifties and who had just recently become a Christ-follower. Like many in the suburbs of Chicago, this particular guy has a graduate degree in a professional field, but a grade school understanding of Jesus and faith.

C. I wanted to hand him something that set out the basics – doing so in a way that leveraged his understanding of history, philosophy and literature.

D. This turns out to be easier said than done.

1. As you have heard me say before, when it comes to the Christian faith, the foundational principles are not simple. In math you learn that $2 + 2 = 4$ before you learn to do geometry and calculus. In literature you learn your ABCs – and read *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish Blue Fish* before moving on to *The Brothers Karamazov*.

2. The basics are simple. In faith, the basics are not simple, they are radically different answers to the basic questions: Who am I? What is expected of me? How do I know what I know?

3. In the first two days of my sabbatical, the seven letters became forty. And I am a long way from having them done. But I keep working on them because I keep running into people – new to faith – who need to get the basics right.

E. So, here and there I am going to be unpacking some of the foundational truths – doing so in a way I hope helps new people be planted, and those who are planted, to keep growing.

III. Today the topic is faith. And it is important.

A. In Habakkuk we are told that “the just shall live by faith.” In Ephesians we are told that we are “saved by grace through faith.” In Hebrews 11 we are told that “without faith it is impossible to please God.”

B. Clearly, we need faith. But what does that mean? What does it look like? It turns out that the word *faith* is used in a lot of different ways by different people,¹ and that it is pretty poorly understood.

- C. There are several framing comments that need to be made.
1. I need to start by noting that we all have faith. I do, you do and so do Richard Dawkins and Carl Sagan – prominent men who spend their time attacking the faith of others. We all believe things we do not fully understand.
 - a) I can explain the concept of lift and why airplane wings are designed like they are to take advantage of it. But it still seems pretty crazy to me that planes fly. When I get on one it's more an act of faith than my knowledge of physics. Hey, I do not understand how a brown cow eats green grass and makes white milk. There are a lot of things I believe without understanding.
 - b) Secondly, we demonstrate a lot of “faith” every day. We assume that the chairs we sit in will hold our weight. And that other drivers know to stay on the right side of the road.
 - c) But even more than this, we all accept things that cannot be proven. Many materialists claim that they only believe in what can be demonstrated by science and reason. Carl Sagan famously said, “The cosmos is all there is, and all there was, and all there ever will be.” OK, well, that is a statement of faith. It is not based on reason. And, what's more, as 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant noted in his book, *A Critique of Pure Reason*. You cannot use science to disprove the spiritual realm.
 2. We all have faith – we are not going to explore faith in general. We are going to focus on Christian faith.
- D. Secondly, I am not going to comment on how our faith evolves through various intellectual stages – ala James Fowler and his work, *Stages of Faith*. In that classic book, he notes that just as we move through other stages of life and development (stuff linked to Erik Erickson, Piaget and the like), our beliefs evolve.
1. Kids initial believe because they are told something by their parents. This is blue; you live in the United States; that is hot.
 2. Then they move to a stage where they believe a lot of things – sometimes passionately - even if they have not really thought about them. Michigan is better than Ohio State. Then there are stages where they start to think critically and question their parents views. There are stages beyond that. I'm not unpacking that.
- E. Nor will I go much into why we believe what we believe – the field of epistemology.
1. In Greek, the word for faith is *pistis*. Epistemology is the study of why we choose to trust some things over others. There are four sources of authority we pick and choose from: reason, tradition, experience and revelation. All of this speaks to the last of the big seven big questions: why do I believe what I believe.
 2. As Christians we recognize value in all four sources of authority. The questions is how are they balanced. This is not a topic for today!

IV. The topic of faith is big and deep and we cannot exhaust it today, but we can ground ourselves in the basics, unpacking what it means to be people of faith in Jesus and to grow in that faith. And that starts with a definition.

A. The New Testament is a book designed to explain and cultivate that faith. On numerous occasions the writer – such as Luke or John – will say: I am writing to persuade you to place your faith in Christ.

B. Hebrews 11 – the faith chapter - opens with the statement “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That is a bit more of a description than a definition. And the rest of chapter 11 gives us examples of faith.

C. As a working definition, I want to suggest that faith is a belief and that belief’s corresponding actions. And that the Christian is the believe in Jesus and what he taught.

D. Part of the reason this can be a bit confusing is because the word faith is used to describe both the act of believing and the essentials tenants of what is believed – which the early church first summarized in the Apostle’s Creed:

1. Christianity is not a generic belief in God. It is the conviction that a very specific set of historical claims are true. Those looking to be baptized into the faith – into the church – were required to say:

a) I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

b) I believe 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, died, and was buried.

c) On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

d) I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic** church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

V. To flesh this out, let me tell you what faith is not.

A. Biblical faith is not believing things that you know are not true.

1. Some who mock Christianity suggest that this is what faith is. H.L Mencken,² a popular skeptic back in the 20s and 30s stated that, “Faith is an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.”³ No. Faith is not being told that $2 + 2 = 5$ and you’d better accept it if you know what is good for you. Biblical faith is not believing things you know are not true.

B. Number Two: Faith is not a feeling

1. And, in fact, feelings are not always a confirmation of faith. Sometimes they might be. We should not be down on feelings. Emotions can be wonderful things. But, just like our heart, our body and our mind, they are damaged by sin.

2. Over time, as we grow in Christ, our emotions tend to fall in line with our faith. But in a fallen world we have to be careful about following our feelings. And I share this because some people seem emotionally persuaded of things, and believe they are true, when they are not. So, it’s important to note that faith is not a feeling.⁴

3. It is an act of the will in which we rest in Jesus. It is putting our weight down. It is realizing that there is no one like Jesus and going all in. Not because we do not still have some questions or doubts, but because we have seen enough to know that this is the best path.
- C. Three: Faith is not psychological certitude.
1. I spoke about this recently in a sermon on doubt.
 2. Our belief - and the corresponding actions - are based on something considered trustworthy, even in the absence of absolute proof.⁵
- D. Number Four: The Christian faith is not a leap in the dark.
1. Faith is not reason, but faith is not against reason, and God doesn't expect us to believe without support. The Hebrews 11 passage I keep citing contains references to people of faith. Moses is one of them. Think about his situation.
 2. If you go back and read about the call of Moses by God – back with the burning bush – you see that God provided signs for Moses. He did miracles in front of Moses – as evidence of His call.
 3. And when Moses went before Pharaoh, he trusted God and told Pharaoh to trust God also on the basis of what Moses had seen, and on the basis of the miracles he then did before Pharaoh. In that sense Moses' call to Pharaoh was based on evidence.
 4. We can also look at what Jesus did. He will demand that people put their trust in Him, but before that He does many miracles to show them who He was. In fact, in John 14:11 Jesus said, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at the least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves."
 5. We are not expected to make a leap in the dark. God has provided evidence. He did so in the past and He does so today.
 6. The primary evidence we see comes from this book – which is living and active and reads us. As we read, God confirms.
 7. It also comes from: fulfilled prophecy and other history; it comes from the amazing life of Christ; it comes from his teaching and the evidence for the resurrection.⁶ It also comes from the things written our heart. We have a sense that there is a God. We can try to beat it down, but it keeps popping up.
 8. There is also evidence out there if we look around. One is the universe itself – which is highlighted in verse 2, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."
 9. We cannot reason our way to faith. We can't go into a lab and prove God. We can't design a mathematical theorem that establishes – in a way that demands that anyone who is smart believe. But we are not taking a blind leap into the dark.
 - a) There is the cosmological argument – which says, if something exists, then we know that: 1) Either it has always existed; 2) or that it came into existence on its own (it spontaneously generated); or 3) that it was created by something else that already existed.

- (1) Those are our options. It's either eternal or it's not. If it's not, then it either came into being on its own or something else created it.
 - (2) Now, those who study physics know that the universe has not existed forever because if it had we'd be in heat death by now. The sun would have burned up all its Hydrogen and the show would be over. Most estimate that the universe is between 11 and 20 billion years old. So, it's not eternal. Which means it either created itself or something (someone else) else created it.
 - (3) Spontaneous generation used to be a popular idea because we thought there were examples it in everyday life - namely bread mold. It wasn't there one day and then, low and behold it was. It created itself. We now know that's not true. That mold spores just traveled through the air. And in fact, we now know that things don't just pop into being. And that there is no way that they can.
- b) Now that doesn't stop people from talking that way. People who should know better. Important and smart people should know that what they are saying doesn't make any sense. The universe was created by space, plus time plus chance.
 - c) Would you please think about that? If I give you a box of space – nothing at all – just space. And a billion years. What will you have at the end of that billion years that you didn't have at the start? Nothing. Nothing at all. Absent the intervention of some outside forces, if you start with nothing you will end with nothing. And adding “chance” to the mix – the universe is the result of space plus time plus chance – adding chance doesn't change that. Chance can't make things happen. It's not a force. It's a statement of probability. What is the chance, that space plus time plus chance is going to create the universe? Not a chance.
 - d) Which means we only have one option. The universe had a beginning. It didn't create itself. So someone or something that existed before the universe – that had eternal qualities about it – had to create it. This is a reasonable argument. More reasonable than the other options.
10. There is another argument – called the Teleological Argument, or the argument by design. It used to be called the Watch Maker argument.
- a) If you see complex order in something – like a watch, or a meticulously groomed garden, or a computer program – you think, something intelligent is at work here.
 - b) In recent years it keeps getting stronger, persuading some previously reluctant scientists to say “I'm now persuaded. The universe shows evidence of a designer.”

c) The more we learn about life and the brain and the universe – and how finely tuned it is – the more we say, this cannot have fallen together by chance.

d) Please note: as I have said before, there is enough evidence to persuade anyone who is open to be persuaded. But belief in God is not a simple math problem. Faith of a certain sort is required.

11. So, one: Faith is not a leap in the dark. Two: Faith is not magic. Number Three: Faith is not a leap in the dark.

E. Five: Biblical faith is not magic

1. It's not believing that just because we affirm something, that something is true. Many talk this way today. They suggest that if a view is sincerely held, it needs to be honored. It is as if we have the ability to make $2 + 2 = 5$ if we only believe it strongly enough.

2. It is important to value our ability to believe whatever we want to believe. But we need to separate the value of our religious freedom from the value of the ideas we hold. All people have value. But not all ideas are true.

3. It is also important to note that Christian faith holds that faith is no better than the object in which it is invested. We can believe with all our heart that $2 + 2 = 5$, but our faith doesn't change the facts. Or, as Paul said, "If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, our faith is in vain." We are not expected to have faith in faith. There are no points for sincerity.⁷

4. This means that our beliefs can be wrong. Imagine for a minute that there are four people in the room instead of 400, and that I ask them three questions.⁸

a) Starting with, "How many marbles are in this jar?" And then I write down everyone's answers. And then I asked, "What is your favorite song?" And I also write down everyone's answers. And then I said, "Well, there are actually 83 marbles in the jar. And we look to see who was closest." And then I asked, "Who was closest on the song?"

b) At that point people would protest that there is no right answer for a favorite song. People are entitled to pick their own favorite song. A person's favorite song is a matter of taste. I concede that point and then I ask the final question – the real question: When we decide what to believe in terms of our faith, is that more like guessing the right number of marbles in the jar or is that more like choosing your favorite song?"

5. Tim Stafford, writing ten years ago in Christianity Today, said that the pastor who has been conducting this experiment in his confirmation class, reported that everyone in his high school class says, "Choosing one's faith is like choosing a favorite song." It's a matter of taste.

6. Well, in America we have the legal right to believe whatever we want. And that is a good thing. But for the record, just because we believe it doesn't mean it is true. And this line of thinking is not how the Bible defines faith. This line of thinking is common today. When it comes to spiritual issues, many believe that sincerity counts. But that is faith in faith.⁹

7. But let's not miss the bigger point. God is who God is. He is not who we decide He is. He has revealed himself to us in His Son and He explains truth to us through His Word. Our decision to have faith in another God – or to believe we can have a relationship with God in whatever way we want to – doesn't change who God is or how He has established the relationship with His creation. Our faith doesn't change God. To believe that it does is to confuse faith with magic.

8. At this very important level sincerity doesn't count. You can believe with all your heart that $2 + 2 = 5$. Your belief doesn't change the fact that the right answer is 4. The object of our faith is what is important. Our faith needs to be placed in something – or someone – who is faithful.

9. Number One: Faith is not believing things we know are not true. Number Two: Faith is not magic.

F. Number Six: Faith is not belief

1. These two words are very similar. But technically belief is intellectual. It lives in the mind. To believe is to agree in principle. And that is fine as far as it goes. But it often doesn't go far enough.

2. There is an old story about a high wire act. An acrobat suspended a wire across Niagara Falls and wowed the crowds by riding his bicycle back and forth across it. One day, after riding over he asked, "Who believes I can do it again?" Everyone raised their hand. And then he asked, "Who will get in the basket and ride with me?" The hands all went down. They believed that he could do it. But they were not willing to put their belief into action. What they lacked was faith. Because faith – biblical faith – is not just intellectual assent. It's that intellectual assent in action.

3. Faith is a verb. The faith you have is the faith that you show. This is what James meant when he wrote, "Faith without works is dead." Because faith without works – faith without action – isn't faith.

VI. So what is faith?

A. I've been telling you what it is not. What is it? What can be said about it? Earlier:

1. I cited Hebrews 11's opening line – faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. I also noted that the entire chapter is full of examples of faith.

2. I also gave you a working definition:

B. It is also important to note that on matters of faith we need to be right.

1. Our life is shaped by a set of assumptions. Everyone's is. It's important that our assumptions are right.

C. We should note that our faith is not a discrete piece of our life as much as it is a vantage point that shapes everything aspect of our life.

1. Let me suggest that you not think about your faith as a slice of life's pie. In other words, our life is divided into various wedges. The main ones would include work, family, health, friendships, leisure, etc. It looks like this:



- 2.
3. There are those who think that people with religious faith add a wedge for faith, and that the more religious they become the bigger the piece of pie labeled faith becomes. Like this:



- 4.
5. But it doesn't work like that. Earlier I suggested that our faith was like a pair of eyeglasses through which we see and understand everything. Here I am suggesting that faith is not a piece of the pie; it is the pie pan. It's not one piece of our life vying for space alongside everything else. It's the pan that gives shape to everything else – i.e., to work, family, health, friendships, leisure and more. And everyone – atheist, theist, agnostic, etc. – has some sort of pie pan. Our world is shaped by our beliefs.¹⁰

6. In light of this, it is more important that our faith is true than that it is helpful. I stress this because many disagree, and they are particularly inclined to disagree in a crisis. When life gets hard it's common to hear people say, "Whatever works for you is great. Whatever gets you through the night is fine by me." The subtle implication is, it doesn't matter if it's true or not.

7. Let me be polite, but very clear: I believe this is well-intentioned nonsense. Encouraging people to believe whatever makes them feel good is not helpful or loving. It is akin to saying that the bridge will hold the truck regardless of the integrity of the bridge. It is faith in faith itself, faith in the power of our will to change reality.

VII. One final point. I want to end by giving you a chance to respond. There is so much more that could be said.¹¹

A. I'd love to talk about the fact that:

1. growing your faith is your responsibility (not mine, yours!)

2. I'd like to note that it is a great opportunity. Spiritual maturity is a reward. Closeness to God. Greater wisdom and self-control and peace.
 3. It is worth noting that faith comes by hearing
 - a) D. L. Moody said that he was praying for faith with the hope that one day it would strike him like lightning. But faith didn't seem to come.
 - b) Then one day I was reading in the tenth chapter of Romans, where it said: Now faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. I had closed my Bible and prayed for faith. Now I opened my Bible and began to study and my faith has been growing ever since.
 4. It is worth noting how important our friends are.
 - a) Faith is much more of a community event than those of us weaned on American individualism can understand. But we need each other. We need to encourage one another, care for one another, help cultivate the faith of each other.
 5. It is worth noting how helpful it can be to make commitments to spiritual practices – to the daily reading of God's Word, to church attendance, serving, a small group and to a half dozen other things.
- B. I want to end by noting the general need to take action.
1. Some of you need to lean in and embrace Christ.
 - a) You have been circling the plane waiting for something. You've been waiting for an emotional experience or to have all of your questions answered or something. You need to look and say, "I do think there is something about Jesus. I am going to put my weight down."
 - 2.
 3. Some of you express faith, but you haven't really done anything with it.
 - a) If we say, "I believe in Jesus," but it doesn't affect the way we live, the answer may not be that we now need to add hard work to our faith, so much as that we haven't truly understood or believed in Jesus at all. It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Is your faith in Christ. Have you opted in?
 - b) Some of you have made a decision to follow Christ, but you have not taken a next step. For instance, like baptism.
 - c) The waters of baptism do not save us, but being baptized is something we are called to. And some of you need to take that step.
 - d) There are other next steps – getting into a small group, reading the Bible, having a spiritual check in. But I am going to end here.
 - e)
 - f) And once we do, we need to keep leaning – for instance, we need to be baptized. Some of you need to take that step, and in fact you could do that tonight. The faith we are called to is not a casual head-nod towards God. It has teeth. It responds with obedience.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.

- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
10. .

VIII. An Excurses on Faith

A. “Oh sure,” you think. “I’ll admit to that kind of faith. But so what? Faith in chairs, cell phones and Rand McNally is altogether different from faith in God, miracles and angels.”

B. What you may wish to argue is that, whereas religion is based on superstitious assumptions and wishful thinking, your worldview is rigorously grounded in logic and absent of any religious element. But it is not.

C. Obviously much depends on how we define religion. Having just dragged you through that exercise with faith I will not divert here, other than to say this: there is no understanding of the world (and life) that is based entirely on reason.¹² Every worldview begins with a set of assumptions that cannot be proven, only accepted.¹³

D. I am willing to concede that much of what you believe is grounded in fact. And I’ll happily concede that we owe much to science. I’m a huge fan of scientists and thankful for the many ways their insights have improved my life. But I am crying “foul.” Some people push science too far. In fact, some try to push science past the point that science itself allows. Ironically, these people are expressing their faith in science.¹⁴

E. What do I mean about those pushing science too far? There are many today who believe that there is no such thing as the supernatural – that nothing exists beyond the reach of scientific investigation. This claim is valid as an assertion of faith and a commitment to materialism. But it is not a statement of science.¹⁵ It certainly cannot be verified using the methods and tools of science. What if there are things that exist outside of what can be measured? What if God exists but is unwilling to participate in our lab experiments?

F. You are free to believe that Carl Sagan was correct when he said, “The Cosmos is all that is over ever was or ever will be.”¹⁶ But your belief is nothing more than a belief. It is not a fact. Sagan’s quote is nothing more than a naturalist’s statement of faith.

G.

H. More importantly, this means that everyone – including those who say they have no faith – have faith.¹⁷ We all believe in things that we cannot prove.¹⁸

I.

J. I realize that this line of thinking is pretty disruptive to some, because we live in a world that assumes that reason is unbiased – i.e., that it rests on public facts, whereas faith rests on private values. But it’s not that simple. We all have faith. We all operate on less than perfect information. We assume things based on ideas that seem reasonable.

K.

L.

M.

N.

O.

P.

Q.

R. Obviously much depends on how we define religion. But there is no understanding of the world that is based entirely on reason.¹⁹ Every worldview begins with a set of assumptions that cannot be proven, only accepted.²⁰

S.

T. You are free to believe that Carl Sagan was correct when he said, “The Cosmos is all that is over ever was or ever will be.”²¹ But your belief is nothing more than a belief. It is not a fact. Sagan’s quote is nothing more than a naturalist’s statement of faith.

U.

V. Our Faith is Either Valid or Not: A lot of people have faith in faith. That is, they believe that if they are sincere, their belief is true. This is not biblical faith, it’s wishful thinking.

W.

X.

Y.

Z. In *The Myth of Certainty*, Daniel Taylor notes: “The goal of faith is not to create a set of immutable, rationalized, precisely defined and defensible beliefs to preserve forever. It is to recover a relationship with God.”

AA.

BB. Biblically speaking, the faith you have is the faith you show. James makes this point when he declares that faith without works is dead. The faith you have is the faith you show.

CC.

¹ Faith is not just a word that is used in different ways by different people, it is used in different ways by the same people. Consider the following sentence: If you want to grow in faith, it is important that you place your faith in the historic faith, as opposed to having faith in faith, which is what many people do today. It appears to mean: If you want to grow in God-confidence (Christ-likeness?), it is important that you place your trust in the tenants of historic Christianity, as opposed to engaging in wishful thinking that whatever you sincerely believe in is true must be true, which is what many people do today. Note also: Some use the term faith synonymously with religion – e.g., the Jewish faith. Faith is so central to the Christian religion that, indeed, few call it the Christian religion; they call it the Christian faith instead. When this is done, faith refers to the body of affirmations contained in both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds.

² H.L. Mencken, “Types of Men”, in *Prejudices: First, Second and Third Series* (Penguin, 2010), Ch. 14 in *Third Series* (1922).

³ Salim Muwakkil, “Faith-based violence and religious Zealotry,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 25, 2002, p. 17.

⁴ There are days when I feel spiritually alive and close to God. There are Sunday mornings when I am profoundly moved by the music and caught up in the current of worship. And there are Sunday mornings when that doesn’t happen. There are songs we could sing and stories I could tell that are designed to play to your emotions. To get you pumped up or to make you cry. But we don’t design services with these in mind. It’s not the goal. Because faith is not a feeling. And Jesus didn’t spend much time playing to people’s emotions. He said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

⁵ Mark Mittelberg, *Confident Faith: Building a Firm Foundation for Your Beliefs* (Tyndale, 2013), p. 2.

⁶ The Apostle Paul – who had a legal background and who was adamant that this claim was grounded in fact, not wishful thinking – challenged people to examine the facts. He closes his first letter to the church in Corinth this way: “If there’s no resurrection, there’s no living Christ. And face it – if there’s no resurrection for Christ, everything we’ve told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you’ve staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ – sheer fabrications, if there’s no resurrection.” In other words, Paul says, If corpses can’t be raised, then Christ wasn’t, because he was indeed dead. And if Christ weren’t raised, then all you’re doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. It’s even worse for those who died hoping in Christ and resurrection, because they’re already in their graves. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot. (Tim Stafford, *Favorite Song Theology*,” *Christianity Today*, Sept. 14, 1992, p. 36). In other words, if Jesus didn’t defeat death, then He isn’t who He claimed to be; and if He isn’t who He claimed to be, then Christianity is a cruel joke. It is not a nice collection of beliefs to help you sleep through the night; it’s a cruel hoax and those who embrace it are losers. In short, if it isn’t true, it isn’t helpful. Sincerity is not enough. We can be sincerely wrong. Faith – our beliefs – must be grounded in truth. It is imperative that our answers to the five questions are correct. If we are wrong, our life is destined to crumble, as any unstable structure built on an unstable foundation eventually does.

⁷ Is there any other arena in which we are free to make up our own truth? Are you able to will away gravity? Would you go to a doctor who thought his or her thoughts and imagination changed external reality? Would you trust a banker who “sincerely believed” that $1 + 1 = 11$? And by the way, if you do believe that sincerity is a test of truth, what would you say to the person who sincerely believes that you are wrong? Or the person who thinks the sincerity test is wrong. Or, heaven help us, the person who thinks that salvation comes through sacrificing infants (as did Phoenician and pre-Columbian cultures in the Americas)?

⁸ Tim Stafford, “Favorite Song Theology,” *Christianity Today*, Sept. 14, 1992, p. 36.

⁹ We don’t feel that way when it comes to the “real world.” If we see someone standing on a ledge getting ready to jump we try to talk them down, no matter whether they believe they can fly or not. People all have value, but not all ideas or beliefs do. But at this cultural moment, when we see people believing spiritual or philosophical things that we believe are not true, we are supposed to not say a thing. Indeed, to say something is to be intolerant. I would suggest that to not say something is to be unloving. I am not suggesting that we force people to believe as we do, nor am I suggesting that we be unloving or disrespectful in the way we advocate for truth.

¹⁰ In the introduction to his book, *Heretics*, first published in 1905, G.K. Chesterton states: “There are some people – and I am one of them – who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe (i.e. his worldview or, ‘the glasses he puts on.’) We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy it is important to know the enemy’s numbers, but still more important to know the enemy’s philosophy. We think the big question is not whether their theory of the cosmos matters, but whether, in the long run, anything else does.” (G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, in *The Complete Works of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. David Dooley, ed., Vol. 1 [Ignatius Press, 1986], p. 41).

¹¹ Faith = A Gift from God That Redeems Us. Sometimes faith is used to refer to the vehicle by which we receive grace from Christ and are moved from estrangement with God to adoption into His family. Faith in this context – which is often called “saving faith” – is a supernatural gift. Paul uses faith this way in Ephesians 2:8f when he writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”

¹² As James Sire notes in his book, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College*, “every kind of systematic thought has to begin from some starting point. This starting point has to be taken as a given.” A philosophy professor would

refer to this “given” as a “presupposition” or a “pre-theoretical commitment.” In other words, “the atheist and the Christian are on the same epistemological grounds; both have to assume that something is true before they can prove that something else is true. Even a scientist has to assume the truth of two notions: that ‘the universe is rational and that it is contingent.’” (James Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College*, [IVP, 1993], p. 92).

¹³ I believe that there is a Creator who exists, distinct from his creation, and that He has communicated with us in a variety of ways. I further believe that I have good reasons for my belief. But I cannot prove these things. The atheist believes that I am wrong, but he cannot prove that I am. After all, he does not have perfect knowledge. (If he did he would be a god himself, which would be rather awkward for his argument.) Instead, he makes his claim from a limited perspective, which means that it is always possible that a god exists outside of his realm of knowledge. Therefore, the claim that there is no god is an assumption that cannot be proven and must be accepted on faith.

¹⁴ Although some scientist push science too far, many of the best do not; the late Peter Medawar, a skeptic and Nobel laureate in transplantation research comes to mind. He argued repeatedly in both his *Advice to a Young Scientist* and in *The Limits of Science* that fundamental questions of the sort I pose are beyond the actual scope of science (e.g., *Advice* [Basic Books, 1981] pp. 90f, 101f.). A short list of others understanding this would include Nobel prize-winners John Eccles, a neurophysiologist and a theist, Arno Penzias, a physicist awarded for seminal work on the origin of the universe, and C.B. Anfinsen, Jr., a chemist with strident opinions about a supernatural beginning for the universe (3 of many) – as well as Francis Collins, an evangelical Christian, and the physician and geneticist whose contributions to discoveries of genes underlying cystic fibrosis and other diseases led to his selection to lead the Human Genome Project and to direct the National Institutes of Health.

¹⁵ I’m hardly the first one to point any of this out. Three hundred years ago the German philosopher Immanuel Kant said as much in his classic work, *A Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant, a prominent agnostic, was skeptical of religious things. But he argued that the human activities which we would lump together as science – the study of things that can be measured – would never be able to prove that there was not a dimension beyond measurement.

¹⁶ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Random House, 1980), p.4.

¹⁷ I’ve camped on this point for two reasons because whatever worldview you embrace, it is human nature to believe that it is correct and that you are being reasonable and objective. The truth is, we all have a worldview, and while we can build a case for the accuracy of our worldview, no worldview can be proven. We all accept our starting point, at least in part, by faith. In 1933 the first Humanist Manifesto was drafted by 30 relatively prominent people. It was a renunciation of faith in “traditional theism, especially faith in a prayer-answering god.” But the writers of the first Manifesto were adamant that secular humanism was a religion. In other words it was faith that went in a very different direction – such as the idea that man is inherently good and will, over time, evolve into a better species. Manifesto II equivocated on this point, and Manifesto III – which was released just prior to the new millennium, is adamant that secular humanism is not a religion. (American Humanist Association, “Humanist Manifesto III, a successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933”, at *What is Humanism: Humanism and its Aspirations*; see http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III, accessed 1 September 2014.) In his recent polemic against Christianity, *god Is Not Great*, the late British author and prominent atheist Christopher Hitchens writes, “Our belief is not belief.” To which I reply, “The [Pundit] doth protest too much, methinks.” Of course, Hitchen’s beliefs actually are beliefs. In fact, philosophers would point out that his comment “our belief is not a belief” is self-stultifying – that is, just like the comments, “My brother has no siblings,” or “I always lie,” it can never be true.

¹⁸ At the end of the day our starting assumptions are shaped by an appeal to one or more of four sources of authority: reason, revelation, tradition, or experience. In other words, if you set out to understand why someone believed that $2 + 2 = 4$ you would discover that they based their belief on reason, experience, tradition, revelation (e.g. The Bible, Koran or supernatural vision), or some combination thereof. Those

appealing to reason would ground their answer in logic. Those opting for experience would point out that every time they added two apples to the two they already had they ended up with four. It is possible – though unlikely – that you would encounter someone who appealed to tradition to make their case; perhaps they would cite the counsel of their teachers, who have, from ages gone by, taught students that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is even less likely that you'd find someone who would appeal to divine revelation for support, but if you did they might say, “I know it because an angel told me,” or, “I read it in a sacred text.”

¹⁹ As James Sire notes in his book, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College*, “every kind of systematic thought has to begin from some starting point. This starting point has to be taken as a given.” A philosophy professor would refer to this “given” as a “presupposition” or a “pre-theoretical commitment.” In other words, “the atheist and the Christian are on the same epistemological grounds; both have to assume that something is true before they can prove that something else is true. Even a scientist has to assume the truth of two notions: that ‘the universe is rational and that it is contingent.’” (James Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College*, [IVP, 1993], p. 92).

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²¹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Random House, 1980), p.4.