



# THE GOD YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW

EXPOSING THE 10 BIGGEST MYTHS  
ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

ALEX McFARLAND



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Dedicated to the one most used by God  
to guide me out of myth  
and into truth:

*Angie*

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The main ingredient of stardom is the rest of the team.

Famed UCLA Basketball Coach

John Wooden (1910–2010)

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# Introduction

As a kid, I longed to feel accepted for who I was, especially from my dad. But living on a farm in the South, I could never seem to do things right—my efforts were never satisfactory for my father. The rules seemed to always be changing. I felt as if I were constantly walking on eggshells, trying not to mess up or make him angry. Consequently, I grew up feeling rejected and believed I was never quite good enough.

I felt I needed to depend on someone or something so I could feel secure and have some stability in my life, but my home was far from a safe place. Mom and Dad fought a lot. My family was on the verge of bankruptcy and losing the family farm. With family fortunes and relationships in ruin, I sensed there was nothing I could depend on.

In addition, I longed to feel important to someone, like I mattered. My mother had drilled into me from childhood that the McFarlands were important because we descended from a long line of aristocrats and rich “grand ol’ Southern land owners.” But as a teenager, my sense of significance came crashing down when my dad was about to lose everything he owned.

I came to faith in Christ while in college, but my faith did little to touch my emotional needs for acceptance, security, and significance. It was not until years later that I grasped the true relational relevance of the gospel. In spring 2007 my father was in the final stages of the illness that would take his life. With our time together growing short, I longed to connect with him at a deeper level—something I had hoped for since my early childhood. Now married and living on my own, one evening I tried to share with him a little of what was happening in my life. He stared at me for the longest time and then said, “You think you’re really something, don’t you? But you’re not. To me you’re nothing but a dumb ape.”

All of the rejection, insecurity, and lack of significance from my childhood came flooding back. I forced a smile, struggling to hold back the emotions I was feeling. In response, I whispered, “Well, I’m your dumb ape. And I love you.”

I stood up, walked outside, and sat on the old swing in the backyard where I had grown up. For a long time that night I remained there in total darkness, feeling absolutely numb, and thought about the futility of my whole life. The one person whose affirmation I cared about most would soon pass away, yet I realized that I meant virtually nothing to him. I felt foolish and completely worthless. Silently, I wished I were the one who would soon die instead.

As I looked up at the night sky I thought, *If I’ve ever needed a heavenly Father to love me for who I am, it is now.* At that moment I began a quest to understand how my faith in God was meant to meet the most basic relational needs of my life, both through him and through human relationships.

In the process I discovered that my faith in Christ was not simply an idea to believe, but a truth I was to experience relationally. God had taken on the form of a human. He died so I could live in relationship with him. He did this long before I was

even born, knowing I would sin and make numerous mistakes. I began to understand that I was accepted without condition. Because Christ returned to life and proved himself as Lord, I could know that his unconditional love and acceptance of me was real and I was forgiven. This also led me to know how to give and receive his unconditional acceptance in relationships with others.

I knew in my mind that God's Word was authoritative and reliable. I didn't realize that there was also an experiential truth that spoke to my need for security. This is what my insecure life was looking for—someone who had my best interests at heart and would always be there for me. Through this journey I now better understand how the alleged myths of Christianity can be addressed, both from the factual evidence that exists as well as through the offer of a secure relationship of unconditional love. As we walk through these pages together, it is my great hope that you will experience a similar transformation in your own life and be anchored in a deep, lasting relationship with God.

### **Jesus Loves Me—At Least I Think He Does**

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I sang these words before I even knew what they meant. I would later also learn the popular verse from John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” But from Monday through Saturday, the example I experienced gave me reason to wonder whether I was loved for who I was or for what I did.

Growing up on a farm meant one thing—hard work. There were always animals to feed, fields to work, and equipment to repair. My dad rose before the sun and worked until after it set. He expected no less from me. My days at home consisted

of a schedule more demanding than most pre-season football practices, all in an effort to teach me the importance and value of a “good day’s work.”

While I am thankful for these experiences in many ways, the message they sent had a negative effect on my understanding of God. *If God is a father*, I thought, *then he must operate a lot like my father*. This worldview would lead me to deal with God like a good negotiator. I would perform some good actions to cover up my bad behaviors. If I felt like I was messing up too much (which was often), I would work harder at performing better—reading the Bible, saying a prayer at church, volunteering for a service project. In my mind it made sense. Keep God happy and things will turn out all right.

By college I realized the faulty logic of this approach. No matter how many good things I tried to accomplish, they would never be enough to cover my growing list of shortcomings. I wasn’t partying hard and dropping out of school; I had simply lived long enough to realize I wasn’t good enough to keep God happy in my own strength. My options were either to stop trying or to find some other way to please God.

Through the influence of some college friends, I finally came to understand the true Good News of Jesus. Rather than earning God’s approval, I discovered that I could accept the salvation he had provided as a free gift. I didn’t have to earn a spot at the table; the table had already been set. Instead, I was called to believe in Christ. When I did, I was given a new life.

I wish I could say everything changed about my view of God at that moment. The truth is that my view of who he is and how he operates has taken years to develop. At that time, I realized God loved me and offered me new life as a gift; what I didn’t realize was how big this gift was. It wasn’t merely about a ticket to heaven; it included a transformed life, one where I could find unconditional acceptance in him.

## **Receiving His Love**

It has been said that the greatest lessons you learn often come through the deepest pains you experience. This has certainly been my case. Shortly after becoming a follower of Christ, I graduated college at the nearby University of North Carolina at Greensboro and entered graduate school at a Christian college to prepare for ministry. This was not a popular move in my home, as my father expected me to return after college to help run the family business.

Instead of returning home, I ran about as far in the other direction as possible. Following my seminary graduation, I felt led to take on an unprecedented challenge. I would become the first minister to preach in all fifty states in fifty days. This “Tour of Truth” across America included sixty-four evangelistic services, became the subject of my first book, and was used by God to bring many people to personal faith in Christ.

Part of me thought my parents would finally accept my new calling and celebrate my accomplishments. When they didn’t, the feelings of joy disappeared. Why couldn’t I make my parents happy?

Looking back, this may have been part of my motivation to prove myself in the following years. I served at one of the largest Christian ministries in the nation, spoke at more than fourteen hundred churches and events, published more than a hundred articles and a dozen books, and started a nationwide radio and television program. At one time, I even served as president of a Christian seminary, a position few had obtained at such an early age.

Though successful from a ministry standpoint, I began to realize my relationship with God was more transactional than unconditional. In other words, I unintentionally sought God’s approval by how hard I worked and performed for him. The same way I sought to earn my father’s approval simply

transitioned to earning God's favor. Though I had accepted his gift of eternal life by faith, I was too often living like it depended on me.

It was during this time that God revealed a new understanding of his love for me. Rather than earning his love, I was simply to receive it. My attitude began to shift from earning to receiving. The example of John the Baptist became a personal theme during this time. When asked about the growing popularity of Jesus over his own ministry, John responded, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven" (John 3:27).

In short, God clearly taught me ministry is not achieved; ministry is received.

Just as I did nothing to earn eternal life, I can do nothing to make God love me any more or any less. I am already perfectly loved, accepted, forgiven, and redeemed. Though I had read these truths repeatedly over the years, it was as if God had removed the blinders from my eyes to see his perspective on this issue.

## **Words of Love**

When I pause to reflect on God's words about love, I find promises like:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38–39

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!

1 John 3:1

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

1 John 3:16

Love comes from God.

1 John 4:7

We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19

This love is perfect and unconditional. God loved us before our creation, during our sins, and despite our ongoing failures. In one of my previous books, I noted how God accepts us without condition:

The prostitutes, tax collectors, and beggars . . . all those considered the low-lives whom everyone shunned were in fact the ones Jesus hung out with the most. The gospel message clearly proves that it doesn't matter what your past is or how badly you've messed up, because Jesus' love extends beyond measure. In His loving eyes, you are welcomed and accepted.<sup>1</sup>

## **Finding Acceptance in the Right Places**

When singer Amy Winehouse tragically died due to alcohol poisoning, the story attracted the attention of millions of Americans. Amy was an award-winning celebrity who enjoyed praise from fans, respect from critics, and international fame. But clearly the perks of stardom and the gratification of artistic expression aren't enough to fill the human heart. When public

figures self-destruct it is a vivid reminder that beginning as early in life as possible, individuals need to develop healthy perspectives on their value as human beings.

Amy Winehouse had quietly become part of a group of performers that some call “Club 27.” These musical talents partied hard, burned out early, and died at age twenty-seven (including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain). Winehouse seemed to truly be on a path of intentional

destruction. Her journey included alcoholism, drug use, and shocking changes in appearance. She had many successes that people would assume should amount to happiness—yet it was clear she remained unfulfilled.

Such celebrity passings can serve as an opportunity to discuss some of the basic realities regarding what it means to be human. Though they may not say it in

“Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, and riches take wings. Only one thing endures, and that is character.”

Horace Greeley  
(1811–1872),  
newspaper publisher,  
journalist, one-time  
presidential candidate

these words, all people seek acceptance, significance, and security. We all want to feel like we have value as people and that our lives have meaning. Our pursuits of solid answers to the heart’s deep longings may tempt us toward actions that can be harmful. The quest to fill the heart can lead to destruction of the body and soul.

After working with countless people through two decades of ministry, I have interacted with many who have worn themselves down and burned themselves out because they did not know their true worth. I believe it is important for people of all ages to find personal worth, value, and meaning in appropriate places. The natural longings of the human mind and soul should be answered in ways that are beneficial to the individual.



For those who follow Christ, there are clear and tangible reasons to feel accepted. Our understanding of our personal worth is built upon several biblical principles:

1. We are created in God's image;
2. Jesus personally cares about us;
3. We are part of a family of people who follow Christ (the church);
4. Our citizenship and future residence are in heaven; and
5. God has a perfect purpose and plan for our lives.

These truths can offer great encouragement, but we realize emotions don't automatically "catch up" to the facts we hold in our mind. Self-esteem issues often feed on irrationality. We must vigilantly pursue an honest view of ourselves, our circumstances, and God. Feelings of insecurity (which can lead to unhealthy behaviors) should not overpower the facts (that we are made in God's image and are complete in Christ).

Of the five realities listed above, none lead us to find our value by comparing our lives to others'. Someone else will always come along who is more attractive, is a better athlete, has more money, has a higher GPA, drives a nicer car, or owns a bigger home. If we approach life as a competition, it doesn't take long to realize we eventually get left in the dust of the next fastest runner. Instead, we find our comfort in the acceptance that comes from Christ.

Tragic deaths like that of Amy Winehouse act as reminders that people of all ages need a clear understanding of who God is and a personal experience of his love and compassion. This provides lasting purpose and clear direction even during the most difficult moments of life.

## **The Journey of a Thousand Miles . . .**

It has been said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. I pray that the pages in this book will help bring you several steps closer to God. In our time together, we'll look at ten common myths I have observed in communicating with audiences around the world for the past two decades. These persistent ideas continue to rob both believers and seekers—whether young or old, regardless of ethnicity or economics—of an authentic relationship with God. We'll discover that each of these myths contain a grain of truth yet also involve a level of deception that blurs the vision of what God intends for our lives. Together, we'll walk through the biblical and practical ways these myths can be overcome with truth and applied in our own lives and among those around us.

Let me warn you now: The words you read will challenge your assumptions about God and the Bible. I encourage you to be open to a new way of thinking. When we fully grasp the kind of life God offers, we'll find ourselves convicted, motivated, and encouraged to live fully devoted to him. May God bless you as you seek the truth!

# Myth #1



## Christianity is intolerant and judgmental toward others

*Truth: Christianity teaches to love neighbor as self and to share the love of Jesus with others*

Even though Mahatma Gandhi had studied the Bible and met many Christians, he rejected Christianity in large part because he wasn't impressed with Christians. "I like your Christ," he is reported to have said, "but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."<sup>1</sup> Christians *can* be intolerant and judgmental. But as I ask in my book *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask You About Christianity*,

Is the bad behavior of Christians enough to warrant rejection of Jesus as Savior? I would argue no. The person who rejects Christian hypocrisy is aware that there is a missed mark, which is sin. The fact that there are sinners in the world should point to a need for Christ and his redemption—not the opposite. [You

are free to make a] decision about Jesus and salvation. But the basis of that decision should be an examination of the life of Jesus and His teachings, not the sometimes-disappointing lives of His followers.<sup>2</sup>

## **Are Christians Really Intolerant and Judgmental?**

The statement that Christians are intolerant is commonly made when a Christian individual or group objects to a truth claim that contradicts a Christian truth claim. Many today consider truth to be relative and label those who claim that truth is objective as intolerant. However, this is a misunderstanding of intolerance. To be intolerant requires more than denying the truth of an opposing truth claim. Intolerance also requires action of some sort. Disagreement alone is not intolerance.

Second, this view assumes that peace and love are incompatible with intolerance. However, there are many examples where the promotion of peace and love is compatible with intolerance. Take the case of a misbehaving child, particularly a child whose behavior might cause harm to himself or a sibling. The parent will not tolerate the misbehavior and will discipline the child. The discipline administered stems from love for the child and the desire to correct his behavior, bringing about greater peace and safety within the family. The promotion of peace and love is not inherently incompatible with being intolerant.

Other examples can be found throughout history. In the African-American Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged nonviolent protest to promote change in American society regarding segregation and civil rights. He was intolerant of racism and segregation yet promoted his views through peace and nonviolence. He followed both the non-violent principles of Gandhi that had been practiced in India as

well as the nonviolent methods used by Jesus and his followers to spread the Good News.

Sharing and defending the truth of the Gospel may at times be disagreeable. But it is not intolerant and, unless sin in the believer's life results in another motivation, it is done out of love for the unbeliever. While Christianity does defend certain moral standards, biblically informed moral boundaries have contributed much good to the human condition. In a culture where biblical values are diminished, the issue is not, Will there be moral values in a culture? The real question is, Which values will drive our culture?

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13:35

Christianity has often been labeled intolerant and judgmental, but is this an accurate view of Christ's life and teachings? When asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus responded: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37–39).

Jesus taught love for God and love for others as the most important teachings of the faith. While not every Christian faithfully applies these principles, many do. Christianity presents a faith based on love, concern for others, and making a difference in this world that will impact eternity.

## Hot Topic: Why Do Christians Judge Gay People?

If the Bible teaches that Christians are to love other people, then why do Christians judge gay people? This is the concern of many I have spoken with over the years. A biblical view would state that if a Christian truly loves everyone—even someone who is gay—he or she will treat everyone with respect and dignity

regardless of a person's beliefs or actions. And Christians believe that the most caring act they can do is to help someone come to faith in Jesus Christ and live for him.

Homosexual activity, as well as any form of sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and woman, is condemned in the Bible's teachings. As a result, Christians are called to help people move away from sexual activities contrary to God's will and help them pursue purity in their walk with him. What is more loving—to let someone live however they choose, or to help them pursue what is best for their life? This is the challenge Christians face in their efforts to share the Good News of Jesus with those who are gay.

To be fair, Christians vary greatly in their response to this topic. Those who treat gay individuals with hatred or violence clearly violate the biblical teaching to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Other believers, however, have failed to speak truth in their desire not to offend. Rather than speak the truth when inconvenient, a growing number of Christians have chosen to remain silent or to even support gay relationships. Neither is appropriate for those who seek to follow Christ.

How did Jesus respond to homosexuality? Some argue that Jesus never spoke against it and gave no opinion on the matter. This is only partially accurate. Jesus did speak clearly about marriage and sexuality in his teachings about divorce in Matthew 19:4–6:

At the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” . . . So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

In these words, Jesus clearly ruled out sexuality of all kinds outside of marriage between a man and woman.

Notice, however, what was not said. Jesus did not speak frequently about sexuality or homosexuality. He did not single out homosexual activity as a bigger wrong than any other. He instead came to seek and to save the lost, to serve rather than to be served, and to give his life for the sins of all people.

“Whatever a person may be like, we must still love them because we love God.”

John Calvin (1509–1564)

When we realize Christ’s approach to sexuality, we discover that he does not limit our desires or make us feel badly about ourselves; rather, he wants us to live fully for him and according to his ways.

## Why Are Christians So Hypocritical?

One of the most popular Bible verses of this generation is Matthew 7:1: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” No one wants to be told his or her way is wrong. When Christians condemn the actions of others, whether in a kind manner or not, they are seen as hypocritical rather than helpful.

What is the proper response? The following verse in Matthew 7:2–5, often neglected by those who discourage the judgment of others, offers a helpful corrective:

For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Christians are not perfect, just forgiven. The proper response to the sins of others begins with a close examination of our

own lives. Do we hear the words of God yet fail to live them? If so, we “merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves” (James 1:22). Instead, we are called to live humbly before the Lord and then seek to help others in need.

The Bible says that all people are sinners. We are sinners by birth (Psalm 51:5). But we are also sinners by choice, because we know what’s right yet often do what’s wrong (James 4:17). In the day that we all stand before God, the Bible says each person’s conscience will either accuse or excuse him (Romans 2:15–16). The ultimate questions are not, “Have I lived a perfect life?” or, “Was I ever hypocritical?” They are, “What did I do with Jesus?” and, “What was my response to God’s offer of forgiveness through his Son?”

Because everyone at times acts as a hypocrite, this objection is simply an attack against hypocrisy. It says nothing about the truth or falsity of Christian truth claims—except to reinforce the idea that everyone has sinned. The unfortunate fact that Christians are sometimes hypocritical says nothing about whether or not God exists, whether the Bible is true, or if Jesus is God’s Son. The Christian faith does not rest upon the validity of its messengers; it rests upon the validity of its message.

## **Why Do Christians Think They’re Right and Others Are Wrong?**

The number-one thing that sets Christianity apart from other religions is that Christianity offers a relationship with a living, death-conquering Savior. In other words, our God is alive.

When Christians claim the Bible’s content has been preserved and remains unchanged through the centuries or that Jesus Christ was crucified two thousand years ago during Passover and rose from the grave, it’s much more than personal opinion. Christianity is a belief system offering objective truth.



Christianity does not ask people to give their lives for human opinion. Additionally, Christians are people who have experienced a relationship with the person who said he was the personification of truth.

Christians, like followers of other belief systems, think their teachings are true. But contradictory truth claims cannot both be correct at the same time. For instance, Christians say that Jesus was crucified, and Muslims say that Jesus was not crucified. It cannot be true that Jesus both was crucified and was not crucified. One or the other view must be incorrect.

Jesus said that no one could come to God but through him (John 14:6). Was Jesus right about this, or was he wrong? He could not both be the Savior and also not be the Savior. Either he was or he wasn't. The point is that Christians do not insist that their beliefs are true out of pride or stubbornness, but based on their understanding of Scripture.

Christians believe that their faith is reasonable based on compelling evidence that accompanies the claims. Christian convictions can be examined, tested, empirically investigated, and evaluated for their plausibility. In other words, Christianity claims to be objectively true. For example, the cities of the Bible's events are all real cities, many of which can still be visited today. The city of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, still exists. The city of Hebron, the resting place of Abraham from the book of Genesis, is still inhabited in the twenty-first century.

In these and many other biblical accounts, the teachings are based on real locations involving local customs and languages that match the time and place in which events occurred. When skeptics speak of Jesus in the same sentence as the Easter Bunny or tooth fairy, they make an inaccurate connection between myth and reality. Christianity affirms the miraculous, yet it is also deeply rooted in history and reality.

## Isn't Christianity the Same as Other Religions?

One of the illustrations often used to make the point that all religious beliefs are basically the same and will result in the same destination is the story of the blind men and the elephant. The story is told with some variations, but the basic account is that a group of blind men are examining an elephant. Each blind man grasps a different part of the elephant, such as the tusks, the tail, or an ear. They each then give a different explanation for the reality they experience. One says that the elephant is like a wall; another says it's like a rope. We are supposed to then be surprised by the simple wisdom of the solution—they are all right! Similarly, we're told, even though there are many ways to express religious beliefs and worldviews, we're all simply grasping different parts of the one,

"As Christians, we practice tolerance in the classical sense of the word and allow others to hold to their beliefs with which we disagree. We do not threaten or harm them in any way, but all the while we seek to show them that Christianity is true and people everywhere need Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins."

Apologist Jacob Allee

unified reality around us. We are then supposed to realize how foolish we've been by pursuing so many different and seemingly incompatible beliefs, when in reality we're all right.

But does the story of the blind men and the elephant really support the view that all religions teach the same basic message? Not if we investigate carefully. First, the person telling the story is essentially claiming that the different points of view, as expressed by many different religions, are wrong,

and that the only one with the real answer is the person telling the story. That doesn't seem quite right, does it? There was an objective truth to be grasped—the elephant—that the blind men all failed to apprehend. In other words, they were all wrong about the true reality before them. Following this line of reasoning, we could say that worldviews may grasp some

aspects of the truth about reality but fail to grasp the entirety of reality. Buddhists, then, may be right about life and suffering basically being the same, as we all experience pain and suffering, but they may be wrong about the nature of human beings and the nature of salvation. Each person touching the elephant may grasp some truth, yet this example uses an imperfect elephant as the basis for judgment. If an all-powerful God exists, he could reveal more than one piece of himself to those who seek him. In fact, both Christ and Scripture reveal truth about God that are far superior than the example given of the elephant.

Another popular illustration that is supposed to validate the idea of all religions being equal is the story of the paths up to the top of a mountain. The plot of this story concerns the fact that there is more than one path to the top of a mountain. Similarly, there are many paths that will lead to spiritual freedom. To claim there is only one path is not only false but narrow-minded and intolerant. What kind of God would do this? “Of course,” we’re supposed to respond, “how could I have been so foolish! There are many paths to the top of a mountain.”

What’s wrong with the mountain illustration? First, it’s a false analogy. Grasping metaphysical truth is not the same thing as climbing a mountain, no more than coming to the solution of a math problem is like getting to the top of a mountain. Sure, we might go about our solution to a math problem in different ways, but in the end there is only one true answer to the question. Is it narrow-minded to say that two plus two is four and only four? Or is it merely an objective statement of the truth? If we’re on the wrong path when it comes to spiritual truths regarding reality, the best choice is to join the right path.

Many people believe that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam teach the same basic things. While all three of these Abrahamic faiths share a view of one God, there are far more differences

than similarities. They all have different teachings about God, salvation, life's purpose, and the afterlife.

Boston University Professor Stephen R. Prothero documented this fact clearly in his bestselling book *God Is Not One*. Prothero examined eight major world religions, noting that their core teachings are in fact *very dissimilar*.

For example, Hinduism includes many gods, while Christianity has only one. Hindu gods are said to bring peace and to fight against evil spirits. Its scriptures claim 330 million gods exist, emanating as extensions of the one force, Brahman. The most important Hindu gods include Brahman, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahman is considered impersonal and unknowable. Lesser deities are understood as having their own attributes and abilities but are seen as products of Brahman. Brahman alone exists, with all else ultimately being *maya* or an illusion. Does this sound compatible with the teachings of other religions?

In contrast, atheism teaches there is no God. Wicca believes in a god and a goddess. Buddhism sees the universe as one rather than identifying a list of many gods. Other religious movements blend the ideas of one or more religions into additional belief systems. All of these religions cannot be true when they hold to divergent viewpoints on the identity of their very deity.

Another key area of difference involves authoritative writings. In Christianity, the Old and New Testament writings found in the Bible are considered the authoritative works used as the basis for the faith's teachings. Islam uses an entirely different book—the Qur'an—as its authoritative source. Judaism follows only the teachings of the Old Testament that they call the Hebrew Bible. Because each religion follows a different authoritative book, each religion's teachings include a wide range of differing interpretations.

For instance, Islam teaches that salvation is based on works, while Christianity teaches that salvation comes from faith in

Jesus alone. One of the main dividing points between the three Abrahamic religions is that they disagree in their teachings about who Jesus was. Judaism does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah that God had promised his people. Islam teaches that Jesus was just a prophet, nothing more. Jesus, however, claimed to be “the way and the truth and the life” in John 14:6. After making that claim, Jesus added, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This is precisely what Christianity teaches: that no one can come to God except through Jesus Christ. This belief separates Christianity from Judaism and Islam because Christianity is the only religion that teaches that belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation. All other religions fail to recognize Jesus’ claim to be the only path to God. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead proved that he is indeed God and confirmed that what he taught is true: Jesus is the only way to God. Similarity does not equal sameness.

## **Truth Matters**

In John 18:38, Pilate asked Jesus the question “What is truth?” At least five essential facts about truth can be known and discussed that are important for addressing the myth that Christians are intolerant and judgmental. They include:

1. Truth exists.
2. Truth can be known.
3. Truth connects with reality.
4. Truth can be communicated.
5. Truth is personally important.

***First, truth exists.*** In contrast with the postmodern worldview that claims truth is relative, Christianity includes a

worldview in which objective truth exists. In fact, to claim that truth does not exist is to make a truth claim. There is no escaping that certain realities do exist and must be addressed. Some of these realities include life and death, morality, and our ultimate purpose.

**Second, truth can be known.** We can observe nature to better understand the truth of the physical world. Science provides an academic look at this observational approach to truth in the

natural realm. In the spiritual realm, Jesus claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The Bible claims that there are not many ways to know God, but only one, and that there are not many gods and goddesses with the choice given to us regarding which ones to follow or whether to follow any at all; God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

In contrast, some suggest beliefs about truth and morality are based on personal preference, cultural conditioning, or religious background. In other words, there are no absolute moral rights or wrongs. While there are many cultures worldwide, there is also a universal sense of morality, or right

and wrong, found in every culture of the world. While many theologians use this observation to point to the reality of God's existence (known as the moral argument), it is also important to note that this universal sense of morality includes many similar moral beliefs. Laws against murder, theft, and other offenses suggest there are universal truths regarding morality as well as truths about the physical world.

“Religion’s misdeeds may make for provocative history, but the everyday good works of billions of people is the real history of religion, one that parallels the growth and prosperity of humankind. There are countless examples of individuals lifting themselves out of personal misery through faith. In the lives of these individuals, God is not a delusion, God is not a spell that must be broken—God is indeed great.”<sup>3</sup>

Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion*

***Third, truth connects with reality.*** Truth is not merely “out there” somewhere to be discovered; it is embedded in the reality around us. What does this mean? In some Eastern religions, it is claimed that this world is an illusion. To find the truth or true reality, one must meditate and seek the truth that can be found in an enlightened state. But this is only partially accurate. While we can meditate on the truths of God, there is no escaping the reality around us. The car you drive is not an illusion; it is real. The people close to you in your life are not illusions; they are real people you care about and who care about you. Truth connects with the reality around us. We may not always understand it accurately, but it does exist and includes purpose and meaning.

Truth is also not something we create, but something we seek. We don’t get to wake up one morning and say, “London is the capital of the United States.” No one will accept your postmodern perspective if you say, “Washington, D.C., as the capital of the United States is truth for you, but not for me. I prefer London.” Why not? London is not even located in the United States, and the U.S. already has its own capital city: Washington, D.C. As a child, you learn the truth about the capital of the nation; you don’t get to choose your own. While there are many areas of life in which we can choose our preferences, there are other areas in which truth exists. When we blur this distinction, we can find ourselves looking foolish when we realize there is an objective truth in an area we considered a preference or choice.

***Fourth, truth can be communicated.*** The letters, words, and paragraphs on this page have meaning that is intended to communicate ideas to help you as a reader. Likewise, the Bible also communicates truth to assist us in our spiritual lives. People can debate whether it is true or accurate (we will discuss this in detail in a later chapter), but the Bible is clearly a book written to communicate truth to those who seek to follow Jesus.

*Fifth, truth is personally important.* A warning sign that says *Poison* on a bottle can save your life, but only when you read and obey it. When the bottle is on the shelf at a store, the truth that it includes poison is unimportant to you. However, when you hold the bottle in your hand, the decision regarding how to use it becomes personally important. It can be used for its intended, helpful purpose, or it can be used in a harmful manner. Truth has implications and consequences in our lives, sometimes even involving situations of life and death.

I joke that we like to say truth is relative when it comes to matters of faith, but we would never make such a claim when the consequences are negative to our own lives. If a doctor told you that you were facing cancer, you would want to know how to defeat it. You would not be satisfied if he responded, “Just take whatever medicine you want; they’re all the same,” or if he said, “The operation doesn’t matter. You can pick the one you like best.” We know medical operations are not a game! They can be a matter of life or death.

The same is true spiritually. If we want to know how to live beyond this life and to enjoy a life of purpose and meaning today, we must seek the truth regarding the matter. It is not an issue of personal choice or preference. It is not intolerant or judgmental to seek what is right and to communicate it to others. The truth is what we search for, savor, and share to help others.

### Building Bridges to Share the Good News

The late Dr. Jerry Falwell founded Liberty University and served as pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. Larry Flynt is the publisher of *Hustler* magazine. Both men were known for speaking their minds. Falwell’s son, Jonathan, recalls what happened after a debate between his father and Flynt:



Mr. Flynt asked my dad if we could give him a ride back to Lynchburg in my dad's private jet. Dad said yes, so we traveled to the airport and boarded a beautiful black-and-gold Gulfstream III. As we flew to Virginia, I sat across from Dad and Mr. Flynt as they had a long conversation about sports, food, politics, and other ordinary topics. I was amazed and bewildered because they kept talking like old friends.

After we dropped off Mr. Flynt in Lynchburg, I asked Dad, "How come you could sit on that airplane and carry on a conversation with Larry Flynt as if you guys were lifelong buddies? Dad, he's the exact opposite of everything you believe in; he does all the things you preach against; and yet you were treating him like a member of your own church. Why?"

Dad's response changed my whole outlook on ministry. "Jonathan," he said, "there's going to be a day when Larry is hurting and lonely, and he'll be looking for help and guidance. He is going to pick up the phone and call someone who can help him. I want to earn the right to be that phone call!"<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Falwell employed a significant principle in his dealings with Mr. Flynt: In order to earn the right to share our viewpoint with others, we have to build bridges rather than burn them. Sincere followers of Jesus are not intolerant and judgmental.