

BENEFIT *of the* DOUBT

BREAKING *the* IDOL *of* CERTAINTY

Gregory A. Boyd



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Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt*
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I'd like to dedicate this book to my dear, artistic, super-creative, and highly gifted friend, Terri Churchill. Terri worked as my editor throughout the duration of this project, and her feedback, corrections, and insights have made it a much better work than it would have otherwise been.

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Abbreviations

ASV	American Standard Version
CEB	Common English Bible
CEV	Contemporary English Version
ESV	English Standard Version
GNT	Good News Translation
GW	<i>GOD'S WORD</i> Translation
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV	King James Version
Message	The Message
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NIV	New International Version
NIV 1984	New International Version, 1984 edition
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Phillips	<i>The New Testament in Modern English</i> , J. B. Phillips
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TNIV	Today's New International Version
WEB	Webster's Bible
YLT	Young's Literal Translation

Introduction

Certainty Lost

I encountered Christ in a very powerful way when I was seventeen years old. The experience was so overwhelming that for about a year I felt absolutely certain that everything this Pentecostal church taught me was true. Unfortunately, as is so often the case with Pentecostal or charismatic churches, this church valued emotional experiences over reason. In fact, questioning matters of faith was viewed with suspicion, and expressing outright doubt was considered positively immoral.

This didn't bode well for me, for up until my conversion I'd always been a questioner. Since childhood I had found it hard to accept things just because someone told me it was so. I recall the nun who taught my second-grade catechism class angrily reprimanding me because I kept asking "why?" and "how do you know?" She said something like, "Mr. Boyd [the nuns always addressed me this way for some reason], too much questioning does not please God! *Faith* pleases God!"

In any event, my initial experience with Christ, combined with several subsequent powerful experiences, sufficed to keep my questions and doubts at bay for almost an entire blissful year. Despite the fact that I struggled with a particular nagging sin that I at the time believed required me to get "resaved" several times a week (I'll say more about this in chap. 5), I for the most part enjoyed the euphoria of feeling

absolutely certain I had found “the truth” through my senior year of high school. I was absolutely *certain* I had one single eternally important purpose in life, which was to help others discover “the truth.”

Though I now see my state of mind during this brief period as childishly naive, I can’t deny that part of me has a sort of nostalgic longing for it. I know I’ll never again enjoy such bliss this side of death. And while I think this mind-set is misguided, self-indulgent, idolatrous, and even dangerous, as I’ll argue later, I completely understand why a multitude of believers try to cling to it. *It feels good!*

For me, such certitude was destined to crash. As I’ll share in this book, it took just one university course in evolutionary biology and one course in the critical study of the Bible to blow my blissful certainty sky-high. I obviously managed to piece my faith back together eventually, but my yearlong vacation from my incessantly questioning brain was over for good.

The faith I eventually recovered and have struggled to grow in ever since has been anything but certain. My core commitment to Christ has been mostly unwavering, but I’ve had questions, doubts, and confusions about most of the beliefs Christians typically espouse. Not surprisingly, my beliefs have changed quite a bit over the years, with the number of convictions I have a fair degree of confidence in dwindling throughout the process. At the same time, however, the number of things I feel I *need* to remain fairly confident about has dwindled along with them.

In fact, if I’m totally honest with you—something I promise to be throughout this book—I am now persuaded that, at the end of the day, there is only *one* thing I *really* need to remain confident about, and that is “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). As I’ll discuss in the latter part of this book, there are a number of beliefs that are important, for one reason or another. But this one conviction is all I need—and all I believe any of us should truly need—to feel secure in my relationship with God, my identity, and my place in the world.

What’s Up with Faith?

In any event, one of the things that Christians typically believe in and that I’ve struggled a great deal with is the concept of faith itself.

Like most Christians, I once assumed a person's faith is as *strong* as that person is *certain*. And, accordingly, I assumed that doubt is the enemy of faith. This is, after all, how Christians generally talk. And there are, in fact, some verses in the Bible that can be cited in support of this assumption. "When you ask," James says, for example, "you must believe and not doubt. . . . Those who doubt should not think they will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6–7 TNIV). In chapter 10, I'll offer an alternative interpretation of this and another passage that is commonly used to support this understanding of faith, which I label "certainty-seeking faith."

Yet, as commonsensical as this view of faith is for Christians, I have to confess that it has always bothered me. I admit that it's possible that part of my frustration is personal, if not prideful. For if this understanding of faith is correct, it means my faith has always been weak (with the exception of the above-mentioned year of bliss). This no longer bothers me, but it certainly used to. Early on in my walk with Christ there were times when I wondered if my limping faith would keep me from being "raptured" if the Lord returned in my lifetime.¹ Over the years I've encountered multitudes of unfortunate Christians whose doubts give them similar concerns. If any readers struggle with this, I am confident that by the end of this book they will clearly see that their concern is absolutely unnecessary.

My personal frustrations aside, however, this conception of faith raises a number of perfectly legitimate questions—questions we will be exploring throughout part 1 of this book. For example, Scripture teaches us that we are saved by faith and that the power of prayer, whether for healing or for some other blessing, is directly connected to a person's faith. But I've always wondered, why would God place a premium on one's ability to convince oneself that something is true? What is particularly virtuous about one's ability to push doubt aside and make oneself feel certain?

Let's be honest: some people are naturally good at doing this and some are not, but this ability has nothing to do with their *character*. Whether a person is good at this is simply a function of how the person's brain is wired. Some people's brains are naturally inquisitive and others' are not. And to be frank, the people who are best at convincing themselves that something is true, beyond what a rational

assessment of evidence warrants, are most often people who are either self-delusional or intellectually dull.

Now, I've got nothing against self-delusional or intellectually dull people. God bless them! But why would God unfairly advantage them over rationally balanced and naturally inquisitive people? Why would God leverage whether a person is healed, let alone saved, on this ability—which, if anything, seems to be more of a *disability*? Why did God even bother to create minds that naturally gauge their level of confidence in a belief on the evidence and arguments for and against it if he's only pleased with minds that can make themselves *more certain* than the evidence and arguments for it warrant? I just don't get it!

Here's another example of the sort of problems I've had with most people's concept of faith. If God is pleased by our ability to make ourselves feel certain that a particular set of beliefs is true, then a person is going to be pretty much locked into whatever beliefs they were initially taught to believe. Think about it. How likely is it that people will change their beliefs if they think salvation and damnation depend on whether they can remain as certain as possible that what they *already* believe is true? Not much. But this means that a person's set of beliefs will be determined *by circumstance*—where they were born, who raised them, what proselytizer first persuaded them, and so on. Is this really how our beliefs should be determined?

Over the years I became increasingly convinced that there is something seriously screwed up about this certainty-seeking concept of faith. Look, what it means to believe in something is that you believe it is *true*. But if you're really concerned that what you believe is *true*, then you *can't* leave this belief to chance. The only way to determine if a belief is true is to *rationally investigate it*. Which means you *have* to doubt it. It's simply impossible for people to be concerned that their beliefs *are true* unless they're genuinely open to the possibility that their current beliefs *are false*. There are no two ways around it. But this is precisely what certainty-seeking faith discourages.

A closely related aspect of this common view of faith that has troubled me concerns the way we who consider ourselves evangelicals are typically encouraged to hold it. As my work as a scholar

progressed, I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the fact that my faith depended on so many things. Like most evangelicals, for example, I assumed that believing the Bible to be the inspired Word of God meant I was supposed to trust that every one of its stories was historically accurate. To doubt any one story was to call into question the inspiration of the whole book, including the good news of God becoming a human and dying to save humanity.

As I studied issues surrounding Scripture, however, I occasionally encountered data that seemed to undermine the historical veracity of certain narratives. When this happened, I would feel pressured by my belief in inspiration to spin the data in a way that would instead support the narrative's historical accuracy. While I was aware that evangelical and non-evangelical scholars frequently do this, it felt disingenuous to me. *Is this really what God would want me to do?* I wondered.

Over the years, I have increasingly felt there is something amiss with a concept of faith that inclines me to be anything but totally honest with whatever my research uncovers. At the same time, I have gradually seen less and less reason why my belief in inspiration should require that every story conform to our modern concept of historical veracity, and even less reason why my life-giving relationship with Christ, which has come to form the very core of my being, should be affected by how I evaluate the evidence for any particular biblical story.² There is, I concluded, something fundamentally wrong with this “house-of-cards” model of faith, as I shall call it.

The Harm Our “Faith” Causes

It's my conviction that this certainty-seeking concept of faith is causing a great deal of harm to the church today that most are not aware of. For example, as I'll argue in chapter 8, I believe this model of faith has led many to mistakenly interpret the doctrine that we're “saved by faith” to mean we're “saved by feeling certain about particular beliefs”—most importantly, the belief that Jesus is Lord. This, I shall argue, largely explains why studies show that the faith of most Americans has next to no impact on how they live.

Against this, I will argue that salvation involves a real, marriage-like relationship with Christ that cannot help but radically affect every area of our life.

On top of this, I'm convinced that the idea that faith is as strong as a person is certain, combined with the house-of-cards way of embracing this faith, is behind most of the faith struggles Christians have today. In fact, I am convinced it is the main reason so many of our young people abandon the Christian faith and the main reason most nonbelievers today don't take Christian truth claims very seriously. Among other things, certainty-seeking faith, combined with the all-or-nothing way evangelicals typically embrace it, is simply no longer viable in the postmodern world in which we live.

Owing to technology, the increased pluralism of Western culture, and a host of other considerations, the world we find ourselves in is far more complex and ambiguous than it was even fifty years ago. Whereas the majority of people in the past could go their entire life without having their faith seriously challenged by alternative truth claims, people today are confronted at every turn with the widest array of mutually exclusive and equally compelling truth claims. It's much easier to remain certain of your beliefs when you are not in personal contact with people who believe differently. But when you encounter people with different beliefs, and when those people's sincerity and devotion possibly put yours to shame, things become quite a bit more difficult.

The confusion this intense pluralism has created is such that many today struggle with the very concept of "objective truth." And in this highly ambiguous environment, the invitation to embrace a faith that asks us to *try* to be *certain* about *anything*—let alone certain about a multitude of things, including the accuracy of every biblical story—is unattractive at best, a complete nonstarter at worst.

Now, I am not suggesting we modify our concept of faith simply to make it conform to the zeitgeist of our age. But the unviability of this prevalent understanding of faith, combined with the multitude of problems it creates, as I'll later discuss, should certainly give us pause. It was considerations such as these that began to lead me, around twenty years ago, to begin to seriously wonder if our understanding of faith is correct.

The Message of This Book

My reexamination of the biblical concept of faith led me to the conclusion that the concept of faith that equates strength with certainty and that views doubt as an enemy is, in fact, significantly different from the biblical model. As we'll explore throughout part 2 of this book, while the certainty-seeking model of faith is *psychological* in nature, the biblical concept is *covenantal*. That is, while the former is focused on a person's *mental state*, the latter is focused on how a person demonstrates a commitment by how they *live*.

I hope to show that this model of faith allows us to embrace a rationally anchored faith that is nevertheless compatible with whatever level of doubt, and however many unresolved questions, a person may have. Unlike the house-of-cards approach to faith, this model of faith does not incline one toward an all-or-nothing mind-set, and thus isn't shaken if a person feels compelled by evidence to accept that one, or any number of biblical narratives, are not rooted in history. For while this model yet looks to the Bible as God's Word as the foundation for *what* we believe, it doesn't lean on it as the rational foundation for *why* we believe.

I am convinced that by returning to the biblical model of faith, many if not most of the struggles that thoughtful believers have with their faith, as well as the struggles that cause so many to abandon their faith, can be altogether avoided. And because the biblical model doesn't demand or expect certainty, let alone certainty about a large number of beliefs, and because it is perfectly at home with ambiguity, doubts, and unanswered questions, I also believe this model will be much more plausible to nonbelievers in our postmodern age than are the certainty-seeking and house-of-cards models of faith.

One final thing that I hope returning to the biblical model of faith accomplishes is that it will disturb believers who may be too comfortable in their feeling of certainty. By orienting us away from our subjective mental states and toward how we actually live, I trust my discussion of biblical faith will confront those who have assumed that they are "saved" by virtue of the fact they feel relatively certain that Jesus is Lord, though this feeling has no discernible impact on their life. These misguided believers will see that, while it is unequivocally

true that we're "saved by faith alone," *real* faith can't help but impact our day-to-day lives, and do so in a radically Jesus-looking way.

The only other thing I will say about the message of this book—and this has already been reflected in this introduction—is that readers will find that this book is much more autobiographical than anything I have ever written before. Given the personal nature of faith, it seemed appropriate for me to flesh out my ideas by weaving them into the events in my life that inspired them. A more autobiographical approach also seemed appropriate inasmuch as faith is a gift that God delivers to us by working through the people and events of our lives. As I look back on the winding road that has brought me to where I am today, I can discern the hand of God at every turn. And it just seemed like it would be irresponsible of me not to seize this wonderful opportunity to brag about what Abba Father has done in my life.

The Outline

Before going on a journey, it's always helpful to have a glimpse of the map. So here's an overview of how this book will unfold. It's divided into three parts. Part 1 ("False Faith"), which covers the first three chapters, aims at refuting the mistaken assumption that one's faith is as strong as one is free of doubt. Part 2 ("True Faith"), which covers chapters 4 through 7, aims at unpacking the biblical understanding of faith. And part 3 ("Exercising Faith"), which comprises the last five chapters of this book, is intended to offer insights from Scripture and from my own experience that I hope will help readers exercise their faith in a rationally grounded, yet appropriately flexible, way.

It may help readers to know ahead of time that part 3 of this work builds on insights gleaned from parts 1 and 2 and is the practical goal of this book. My aim in writing this book, in other words, is not merely to dispel a false view of faith and offer readers information on the biblical view, though I think this is important in and of itself. My ultimate goal, however, is to help readers *apply* this information and embrace a kind of faith that is intellectually compelling, passionately centered on Christ, and fearlessly efficient in negotiating the complexity and ambiguity of our postmodern age. To be frank, I have been

driven by my grief over seeing so many walk away from the faith, or stay away from the faith, for reasons that are entirely avoidable.

And just to tip my hand a little regarding the thesis around which this last section is woven, I will argue that the most biblical and intellectually viable way of constructing and exercising faith is to make “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) the center of every aspect of our faith. More specifically, I believe that Christ crucified should be the center that intellectually grounds our faith as well as the center that meets every core need in our life (chap. 8), the center of our interpretation of Scripture as well as our theology (chap. 9), the center of our imaginative world, which, we shall see, is the “substance” of faith (chap. 10), and the center of all that we trust God for (chaps. 11 and 12). As Paul confessed, if we know “Jesus Christ and him crucified,” we essentially know all we need to know about God, ourselves, and our world.

So long as we remain confident enough to commit our lives to God on that basis, we need not fear any doubt or confusion about any matter that may come our way, regardless of how wide or how deep it may run. Indeed, so long as we have Christ crucified to cling to, instead of running from the doubt that plagues us, we can embrace our doubt and calmly seek our Father for how to grow and benefit from our doubt.

May the Lord bless you as you read this book, and as you apply whatever insights you glean from it to your life.

Part 1

FALSE FAITH



Embracing the Pain

Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.

—KHALIL GIBRAN

Be merciful to those who doubt.

—JUDE 22

Certainty-Seeking Faith

Jacobson-Sized Faith

In the Pentecostal church I served while in seminary, Sunday night services always included a time for testimonies. No one was more consistent in sharing than an eighty-some-year-old saint I'll refer to as "Brother Jacobson" (everyone was referred to as "brother" and "sister" in this church).¹ The trouble was that Brother Jacobson almost always gave a version of the same testimony. Standing with his Bible raised in his right hand, he'd typically begin by saying something like, "I've walked with my Lord for over eighty years, and I thank God that, by his grace, my faith in God's Word has never for

one moment wavered, *never!*” “Amen!” the church would respond, though I never knew if this meant that their faith also had never wavered, or if it rather meant something like, “Yes, Brother, we’ve heard that before.”

Either way, this church often talked about how strong Brother Jacobson’s faith was. Every now and then I’d hear someone encouraging somebody by saying something like, “You need a Jacobson-sized faith!” The assumption of this church—and I’ve found it’s shared by most Christians—is that the more psychologically certain you are, the stronger your faith is. In this conception of faith, therefore, doubt is an enemy.

Despite its popularity, and despite the fact that there are a dozen or so verses that can be marshaled in its support (the most important of which I’ll address in chap. 10), this is the conception of faith I will be arguing *against* in this book. It’s not just that I think this model of faith is mistaken. As will become clear over the next two chapters, I believe this model is *gravely* mistaken inasmuch as it can have negative consequences in the lives of believers and for the kingdom movement as a whole.

How Much Faith Is “Enough”?

Not too long ago a middle-aged lady who looked rather distressed approached me after a church service. She explained to me that, while she sincerely tried to believe in the Bible, she struggled with some of its stories. With a worried tone in her voice, she asked, “Why on earth would God include in his Holy Word a story about a poor young girl getting gang-raped, murdered, and dismembered?” She was referring to a story in Judges 19, and it is indeed a truly horrible account. “It’s not exactly the kind of story you’d want to read in children’s church, is it?” I replied. “And pastor,” she continued,

I have a degree in ancient literature, and if I’m honest with myself, I just can’t deny that some Bible stories sound like folklore, not history. Like the one about Lot’s wife turning to a pillar of salt, just because she was curious! Would God really do such a thing? Do we *have* to believe these stories are all literal?

I thought she wanted me to respond, but before I could open my mouth she jumped back in.

And the stories of Samson getting strong when his hair grew long, killing a lion with his bare hands, slaying one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, and sending two hundred foxes into some fields with their tails tied together around a torch? Come on! I'm sorry, pastor, but I just can't keep myself from doubting stories like this. If God knows I'm sincerely trying to believe, do you think that is enough for me to still be saved?

My heart went out to this dear woman. I reassured her that God knows her heart and that she needn't worry about her salvation. And as it concerns her questions about various Bible stories, I shared with her some of the things I'll be sharing with you later on in this book (especially chap. 9). My reason for mentioning her now, however, is because she illustrates the conception of faith I'm going to be talking about. Her question was basically about whether she had *enough* faith to be "saved."² For her, this was really a question of whether her *level of certainty* was adequate to be saved.

As I suspect is true of most pastors, I get questions along these lines quite often.

- Do my doubts disqualify me from "salvation"?
- If I'm fairly sure that Jesus is the Son of God—but not 100 percent certain—am I still "saved"?
- Are my doubts about God's willingness to heal my child the reason she is not healed?
- How much faith do I need to get God to change the heart of my husband?
- I struggle with the idea that God really cares about my family and me. Do you think this is why I can't find a job?

Questions such as these are predicated on the assumption that one's faith is as strong as it is certain. And they each assume that, whether we're talking about salvation, getting healed, or keeping a job, the more certain we are, the more God will be involved in our lives.

Slamming for the Certainty Bell

If you've ever gone to a carnival or fair, I'm sure you've seen that game where people test their strength by trying to ring a bell at the top of a pole with a metal puck by striking a lever with a mallet as hard as they can. It's sometimes called the "Strength Tester." I believe it provides a fair analogy of what goes on inside people's heads when they assume that their faith is as strong as they are psychologically certain.

Think about it. If the strength of your faith is measured by the intensity of your psychological certainty, then the way to increase your faith is to *try to push doubt aside* in order to *make yourself certain*. And in this sense, exercising faith is something like a psychological version of the Strength Tester game. You are, in essence, trying to hit a faith mallet as hard as you can in order to send the faith puck up the faith pole to get as close to the certainty bell as you possibly can.

In this certainty-seeking model, when Jesus said, "according to your faith let it be done to you" (Matt. 9:29), he was saying, "the more certain you are that God will do things, the more you'll see God do those things." So too, when the man said to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24), within this paradigm, the man was asking, "Lord, I can only hit the faith puck a little way up the faith pole, but please help me to ring the certainty bell."

Along the same lines, when Jesus praised the centurion for having "great faith" (Matt. 8:10), the certainty-seeking model would have us understand that Jesus was praising his psychological certainty that Jesus could and would do what he needed him to do. By contrast, when Jesus reprimanded his disciples for having "little faith" (Matt. 14:31), he was, according to this model, expressing his anger that they wavered in their certainty about what he could and would do.

The Level of Required Certainty

With this interpretation of these verses, it's no wonder pastors regularly get the sort of questions I mentioned above. Related to this, it's also no wonder that Christians often instinctively rank things in terms of how much faith they will require. It's like this lady who spoke

with me recently about her troubled marriage. In the course of sharing her problems, she mentioned that she was a heavy smoker who wanted to quit. But, she said, “I’m afraid I don’t have nearly enough faith for *that* one yet.” Quitting smoking would require a greater act of faith than healing her marriage, she assumed, and this meant she would need a Jacobson-sized faith, which she was convinced she lacked. (Truth be told, once this lady told me about the full extent of her marital problems, it seemed to me her ranking system was upside down—assuming faith worked that way.)

The closer to the certainty bell you send your faith puck, the prevailing assumption goes, the greater the blessing you’ll receive from God. I suspect most Christians would agree that you only need a minimally acceptable level of faith to be “saved.” We might say that to get “saved,” you only need enough psychological certainty to get the faith puck 25 percent of the way up the faith pole. If you’re able to muster up more certainty and slam the faith puck (say) 50 percent of the way up the faith pole, then we might say you’ve entered the “basic blessing” zone. Here God may grant you success in your relationships or finances, and you may experience small supernatural interventions like having a headache or toothache disappear or gaining the strength to quit smoking.

If you are able to push doubts away further, however, thereby mustering up the psychological certainty to get the faith puck (say) three-quarters of the way toward the certainty bell, well, then you’ve entered what we might call the “super-blessed” zone. God will now answer your prayers in rather spectacular ways, and you just might experience more impressive, Jesus-type miracles. But if anyone is ever able to vanquish *all* doubt, become *completely* certain, and thereby actually ring the certainty bell with that faith puck, then they presumably could have “whatever they ask for,” which is how people who hold to this certainty-seeking understanding of faith interpret passages such as Matthew 21:22: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

The fact that we still don’t have peace in the Middle East can only mean that either no one has yet rung that bell or, if they have, they were too self-centered to think about this ongoing atrocious conflict and chose instead to acquire a Mercedes for themselves.

In the next chapter I'm going to offer eight arguments as to why I believe certainty-seeking faith is misguided, unhealthy, and dangerous. I will follow this in chapter 3 with a discussion of the ninth, and the most serious, objection to this model, for I'll contend that this conception of faith tends to make an idol out of certainty. And then, throughout the three chapters that comprise part 2 of this work, I'll argue that this psychological conception of faith contrasts with the covenantal concept of faith found in Scripture. In part 3 we'll flesh out some more practical and helpful ways of thinking about and living out our faith.

Before we turn to this, however, I'd like to say something about one of the most common and powerful motivators for this popular conception of faith. It is, in a word, the desire to avoid the pain of cognitive dissonance. To get at this, I'd like to share a little bit of the story of how I found, and lost, my faith.

From Blissful Certainty to Excruciating Doubt

A Lost Certainty and Purpose

As I mentioned in the introduction, I came to Christ at the age of seventeen after having spent several years in the “drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll” culture of the early '70s. While I had a lot of fun, I also felt a painful emptiness that intensified over the two years leading up to my conversion. Despite the fact that the Pentecostal church in which I met Christ was legalistic to the extreme and theologically aberrant in a number of ways, my encounter with Jesus was undeniably real and powerfully life changing. Words can't describe how good it felt to have the gnawing ache of emptiness in my soul replaced with a sense of joy and purpose.

For a little more than a year I enjoyed the bliss of feeling absolutely certain my newfound faith was true. I felt like I knew what life was about, was sure about where I was going when I died (or when I was “raptured”), and had a strong sense of mission and purpose to motivate me to live passionately in the meantime.

Then I enrolled in the University of Minnesota.

Perhaps it was because I felt I had a duty to save people, or maybe it was to impress my atheistic father, whom I'd been debating since

my conversion (he couldn't believe his own son had become one of those "born-again nitwits"), but for whatever reason, I decided to jump-start my university career by taking a summer school course titled Introduction to Evolutionary Biology. I didn't tell any of my Christian friends about my decision because I knew they'd try to talk me out of it. (They'd already tried to talk me out of going to a secular university in the first place.)

As you probably could guess, the Pentecostal church I was saved in believed in "young-earth creationism," which means they interpreted Genesis 1 literally and held that the earth was less than ten thousand years old. In fact, I recall our pastor teaching that, if Genesis 1 wasn't literally true, then "the whole Bible is a book of lies!" So, as far as I was concerned, my entire faith was leveraged on my ability to survive this class with my faith in young-earth creationism intact. To prepare myself, and with rather megalomaniacal dreams of converting the entire class, I read three whole books (yes, *three!*) defending creationism and refuting evolution. I'd never before read so much on a single subject. I felt like a bona fide expert.

Things didn't go quite as I had planned. From the start I took every opportunity to interrupt the lecture, raise objections, and offer counterinterpretations. The professor, who was always very gracious and seemed to welcome my enthusiastic pushbacks, would gently proceed to show how my objections and counterinterpretations were misinformed and/or wildly implausible. This clearly was not his first run-in with a young-earth creationist. When the class would chuckle after I'd been once again silenced, the professor would quickly come to my defense and praise my willingness to question things. It almost bothered me that this pagan opponent of Christ (so I viewed him) was so nice to me, even as he diced me up!

I'd come home discouraged after each class and would spend the remainder of the day poring over the notes I'd taken from my three books, trying to find better lines of attack. After this arsenal was depleted, I went to several libraries and Christian bookstores to find better material, once even gaining some hope from a book I found (called *Fish to Gish*, by Duane Gish) that anticipated one of the professor's counterpoints. But without fail, the patient professor managed to gently expose the weakness of my objections.

By the time we had reached the midterm, I had begun to doubt my one-year-old faith.

The pain of the cognitive dissonance this doubt created in me was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I wanted so desperately to believe my experience with Christ wasn't an illusion and my sense of purpose a false dream. I desperately wanted to reexperience that delightful feeling of certainty I'd enjoyed throughout the previous year.

I eventually shared my pain with some of my Pentecostal friends who, after chastising me for "playing the devil's poker" by taking this class, would tell me that my doubt was from Satan and that I needed to let it go and "just believe." I so badly wanted to return to the joy of feeling certain that I actually tried this several times, but it frankly felt artificial. For a while I even tried to rationalize suppressing doubt by appealing to (and, I now see, grossly misapplying) an idea I'd gotten from Søren Kierkegaard, whom I'd been reading and whom I'd come to deeply respect. In several books he talks about faith as a "leap" that involves passionately grabbing hold of something that is absurd to our reason—namely, the incarnation and crucifixion.³ I recall thinking to myself that, if taking an absurd leap of faith was good enough for a guy as smart as Kierkegaard, it should be good enough for me.

It didn't work. My brain would not let me forget the troubling questions evolution posed.

By the end of the summer school course on evolution, I was a tormented young man who was being slowly ripped in two, with my longing for faith and the evidence for evolution pulling me in opposite directions. Within another half semester—one that included a course that examined the Bible from a historical-critical perspective—I concluded my fight was hopeless. The obstacles to my faith were too formidable, and I could not, for the life of me, find an intelligent and informed Christian to help me work through them. I finally concluded that evolution was true and that the Bible was no different from other ancient works. As real as my experience with Christ had seemed, I concluded that it must have been some sort of strange psychological phenomenon I didn't yet understand. And this, in turn, meant that the joyful sense of purpose I had experienced for a year was nothing more than an illusory oasis in the desert of a meaningless world.

I returned to the atheism I'd embraced in the four years leading up to my conversion. My father was overjoyed. But I had just entered what proved to be the most depressing year of my life.

The Necessity of Pain

The fact that I'm writing this book obviously means I eventually managed to find my way back into the Christian faith. It was a long and arduous journey we need not go into right now. It also began a new journey of faith that was also long and arduous, about which I'll have more to say later on. My present goal is to simply convey to you that I understand how painful doubt can be when it concerns the things that matter the most to us—and there is nothing that matters more than the sense of identity, worth, purpose, and security that is associated with our faith. On the register of things that create pain, seriously doubting one's faith is right up there toward the top, at least for people such as myself who make faith the foundation for their life.

The truth is, the process of learning and growing almost always involves a certain amount of pain. Perhaps you, like me, were a child who found it very hard to accept that Santa Claus wasn't real. I fought my doubt for at least a year, and when my older brother finally convinced me, I cried. Then I got angry—*very* angry. Feeling I'd been duped, I vowed I'd never believe anything anyone ever told me again. While this pledge thankfully didn't stick, I sometimes wonder if this experience is part of the reason I have always had a skeptical streak. I don't like being fooled.

This experience illustrates how painful growing out of old, cherished beliefs can be, which is why we sometimes fight tenaciously, and often irrationally, to resist letting them go, or even letting go of our certainty about them. And yet, if we want to continue to grow, and if we are genuinely concerned with believing the truth, there is no way to avoid this pain. Indeed, having the courage to embrace the pain of doubt and to face unpleasant facts, as well as to embrace challenging questions and to live with ambiguity, is the hallmark of a mature and responsible human being. As we'll see in the next chapter, one of the unfortunate consequences of the certainty-seeking model of faith is

that it encourages pain-avoidance and thus keeps people from learning, growing, and maturing.

To put all my cards on the table, I'm going to be asking you to reconsider this certainty-seeking model of faith, along with a number of other beliefs and assumptions that I'm sure many of you hold dear. And I'm going to be inviting you into a way of embracing faith that accepts that our world is filled with complexity, ambiguity, and unanswerable questions. It's a kind of faith that accepts that there is no absolutely certain place to stand, but that also sees that there is no need for such a place, so long as we have *reason enough* to place all our trust in Christ.

It is thus more than likely that this book will at times be painful, as well as aggravating, for many readers. You may already be fighting an urge to put this book down. Yet the fact that you were interested in this book and haven't yet closed it means that you're open to being challenged, and I applaud you for that. And if you experience some level of pain and aggravation as you move through this book, I want to encourage you to embrace the pain and continue to press on. Remind yourself that this is what learning and growth are all about.

You may end up disagreeing with me, which is fine, but your convictions will be more refined and stronger for having done so. On the other hand, you may end up embracing a kind of faith that is more secure precisely *because* it is free of the need to feel certain. You may discover a way of exercising faith that is more vibrant precisely *because* it empowers you to fearlessly question, to accept ambiguity, and to embrace doubt. And you may end up agreeing with me that this way of doing faith is not only more plausible in our contemporary world and more effective in advancing the kingdom, but it is also more *biblical*.

In fact, for reasons that I'll begin fleshing out in the next chapter, I am convinced that, as widespread as certainty-seeking faith is, it is absolutely unbiblical and even idolatrous.

Whether my arguments that lead to this conclusion are compelling, however, is something that you will have to decide.