

Preface

TO PROTECT AND TO SERVE

“Let’s go interview the husband.”

Alan Jeffries closed the red cold-case notebook and glared at me with obvious impatience. I stared back incredulously. After a long pause, he barked, “What? Why are you giving me that look? Do you have any idea how many of these murders I’ve worked?”

“Al, we’ve been working together for years. I know *exactly* how many cases you’ve investigated. But you just finished reading the notebook, and we haven’t even assembled a list of evidences or charted the potential suspects. You’ve already decided the husband did it.” Alan was the most experienced member of our homicide team, but by this point in my career, I had been fairly successful in working the most difficult cases our agency had to offer. I wasn’t afraid to challenge the man I came to see as a friend and seasoned colleague.

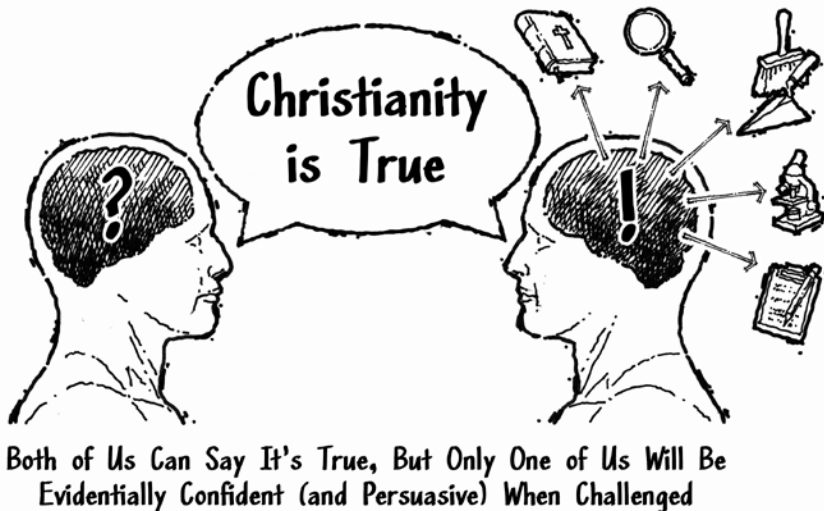
Alan didn’t budge. “Are you ready to go talk to this guy or what?”

To be fair, I could understand where Alan was coming from. The victim in this case was a middle-aged housewife with no known enemies. Most people are killed by someone familiar to them; her husband was a likely suspect on that basis alone. But Alan’s certainty about the identity of our killer was entirely premature.

Months later, after an exhaustive investigation of the evidence and every potential suspect, we concluded our victim’s husband was, in fact, the man who had killed her. Alan was right all along. We ultimately convicted the husband after a lengthy trial. At the sentencing hearing, Alan leaned over and whispered, “I told you so.”

While Alan maintained the husband was our killer from the very beginning, he was only *accidentally* correct in the earliest days of our analysis. By the end, after a long, intense investigation, Alan could boast he was also *evidentially* correct. He had the right suspect all along, but what he once believed *accidentally*, he now knew with *evidential certainty*.

One might argue Alan had good reason to conclude the husband was the killer. Alan's experience and intuition inclined him to target the husband, and Alan was, after all, correct in the end. But his intuition alone wouldn't be enough to convince a jury, and, worse yet, his intuitions had actually failed him (and us) in the past (see chapter 1 of *Cold-Case Christianity*). There's a big difference between *accidental* and *evidential* belief, even though both may lead you to the same conclusion. There are times when accidental belief will land you in the right place, but it seldom stands up to aggressive challenges, and it is often less than persuasive.



ARE YOU A “CALIFORNIAN CHRISTIAN”?

I actually understand what it's like to be in the right place *accidentally*. As I travel to speaking engagements in cold and remote sections of the country, I'm increasingly grateful to have been born and raised in sunny Southern California. Here, it's 75 degrees and dry nearly every day of the year, and it has some of the nation's best beaches. It's the land of opportunity, with more recreational, educational, and employment opportunities than just about anywhere. I'm happy to identify myself as a Californian.

But if you were to quiz me about the nature of California, you'll quickly find I am not the most *informed* resident in the state. What year was California founded? I don't know. How many counties are in California? I'm not sure. How many people live here? I have no idea. How is a bill passed in our state? How is the state legislature organized? I've never

really thought about those things. What's the state bird, the state tree, the state flower, or the state motto? I can't tell you. I guess when it comes right down to it, I'm a pretty terrible Californian. But make no mistake about it; I'm a Californian. It's undeniable. I was born and raised here.

Now think about it for a minute. Are you a Christian the same way I'm a Californian? Were you born and raised in the church yet are still unable to answer the most pressing questions someone might ask about the nature of Christianity? Are you "in the right place" but not really sure *why* it's the right place? Does your affiliation with Christianity feel more like an *accident* than an *informed decision*?

WHY ARE YOU A BELIEVER?

I've been speaking around the country for a number of years now. I often address church groups of one nature or another, and when I do, I usually begin by asking a simple question: "Why are you a Christian?" The response I get is sometimes disappointing. Typically, attendees provide responses in one of the following broad categories:

Answer 1: "I was raised in the church" / "My parents were Christians" / "I've been a Christian as long as I can remember"

Answer 2: "I've had an experience that convinced me" / "The Holy Spirit confirmed it for me" / "God demonstrated His existence to me"

Answer 3: "I was changed by Jesus" / "I used to be [fill in your choice of immoral lifestyle], and God changed my life"

Answer 4: "Because I just *know* the Bible is true" / "Because God called me to believe"

As often as I ask this question, I seldom receive anything other than these four responses. If *you* were asked this question, which answer would *you* give? Some of these are good answers, but others are not. If you're a Christian simply because you've been raised in the church, how can you be sure Christianity is true? If you're a Christian because you've had a transformative experience, how do you know if this experience is truly from the God described on the pages of the New Testament?

As an atheist for most of my life, I learned to be skeptical of people who told me they believed something simply because they grew up a certain way or had an “experience.” I wasn’t raised in a Christian home, and the man I respected most (my father) was a cynical detective. He was (and still is) also a committed atheist. I grew up as a skeptic and noticed something important along the way: the members of every religion seem to give the *same* answers. The four responses provided by my *Christian* audiences today are also the four answers my *Mormon* friends offer when asked why they believe *Mormonism* is true. In fact, the vast majority of believers in any religion—from Buddhist to Baptist—are likely to offer the same responses. While these kinds of answers are *common*, they are not *sufficient*. Mormonism and Christianity, for example, make entirely contradictory claims related to the nature of Jesus, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and a myriad of other important theological truths. Both groups could be *wrong*, or *one* could be correct, but they can’t *both* be right, given their contradictory beliefs. Yet both groups offer the same kinds of answers when asked, “Why are you a Christian/Mormon?”

It seems that *all* believers (regardless of religious affiliation) typically answer this question in the same way, and that’s the problem. If our answers sound like the answers given by every other religious group, we need better answers.

You know the one response I seldom, if ever, get when I ask my believing audiences why they are Christians? It’s this one: “I am a Christian because it is *true*.” Few people seem to have taken the time to investigate the claims of Christianity to determine if they are *evidentially* true. In fact, as I present the case for Christianity around the country, people repeatedly approach me after my presentations to tell me they never knew there was so much evidence supporting what they believe.

These Christian brothers and sisters are similar to my partner, Alan. Their intuitions and experiences incline them to believe Christianity is true long before they’ve actually investigated the case. Like Alan, they’re correct, but when challenged to tell others why they believe Christianity is true, they sound like every other non-Christian theistic believer. Their defenses seldom stand up to aggressive challenges and are often less than persuasive. Why should atheists accept the testimonial experiences of Christians when Christians themselves don’t accept the testimonial experiences of other believing groups—or of atheists?

IT'S TIME TO PUT UP OR SHUT UP

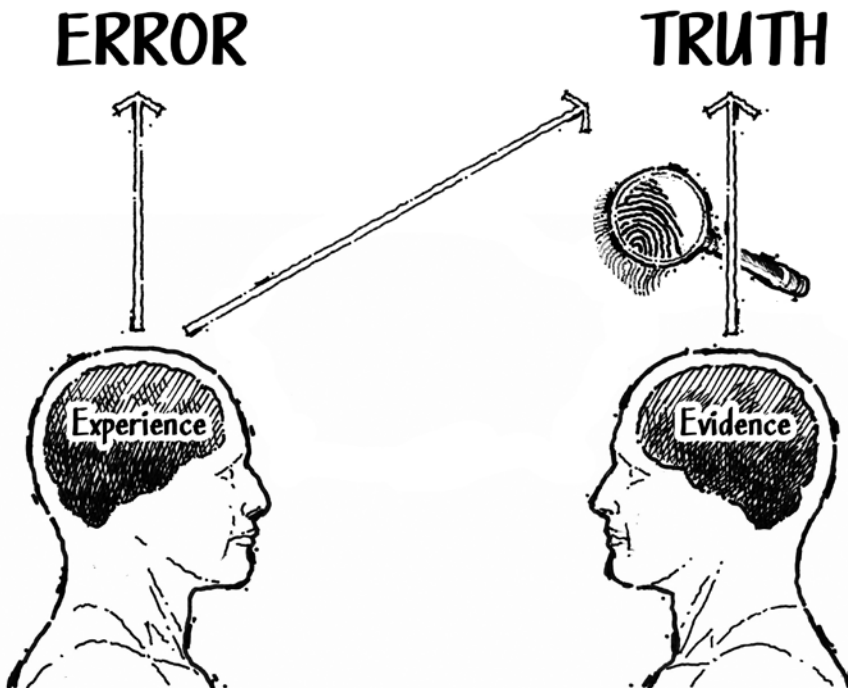
Now, more than ever, Christians must shift from *accidental belief* to *evidential trust*. It's time to know *why* you believe *what* you believe. Christians must embrace a *forensic faith*. In case you haven't been paying attention, Christians living in America and Europe are facing a growingly skeptical culture. Polls and surveys continue to confirm the decline of Christianity.¹ When believers explain why they think Christianity is true, unbelievers are understandably wary of the reasons they've been given so far.

As Christians, we'd better embrace a more thoughtful version of Christianity, one that understands the value of evidence, the importance of philosophy, and the virtue of good reasoning. The brilliant thinker and writer C. S. Lewis was prophetic when he called for a more intellectual church in 1939. On the eve of World War II, Lewis drew a parallel between the challenges facing Christianity in his own day and the challenges facing his country as war approached:

If all the world were Christian it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defence but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. The cool intellect must work not only against the cool intellect on the other side, but against the muddy heathen mysticisms which deny intellect altogether.²

Over seventy years ago, Lewis recognized two challenges facing the church: (1) Christians are largely unprepared to make the case for what they believe; and (2) many in the church still deny the need to be prepared in the first place. We are a largely anti-intellectual group, even though the history of Christianity is replete with some of the greatest thinkers who ever lived. In spite of our rich intellectual history, we have arrived at a point where there is a need to make a case for *making a case*.

I'm not the only one to notice how anti-intellectual the church is today. Atheist activist and philosophy professor Peter Boghossian wrote a book in 2013 entitled *A Manual for Creating Atheists*. It was published around the same time my first book, *Cold-Case Christianity*, hit the bookshelves. Boghossian describes his book as “the first-ever guide not for talking people into faith—but for talking them out of it.” He hopes to teach atheists “to engage the faithful in conversations that will help them value reason and rationality, cast doubt on their religious beliefs, mistrust their faith, abandon superstition and irrationality, and ultimately embrace reason.” In a YouTube video promoting the approach, Boghossian made an interesting observation: Christians fail to process truth claims rationally; instead of assessing the evidence and drawing the most reasonable inference, they typically rely on personal experience, emotional response, and “blind faith.” For this reason, he encourages atheists to engage Christians not on the evidence but on the *way* Christians evaluate truth claims in the first place.

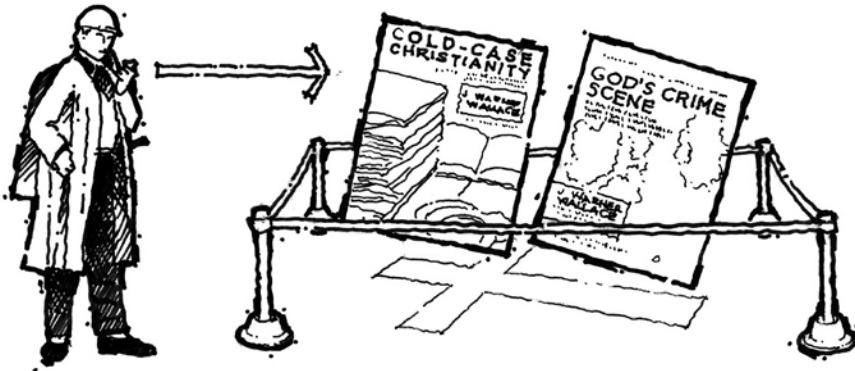


Sadly, my own experience in the church confirms what Boghossian has described. Boghossian, and others like him, believe they need only show Christians how to examine evidence and the rest will take care of itself. Confident of the evidence supporting *their* view, they can't imagine Christianity will survive a forensic investigation in the "age of reason." But as someone who has examined the evidence of God's existence and the reliability of the New Testament documents as a detective, I hold a similar, although opposite, view. If Christians will simply learn how to approach their beliefs evidentially and take the same forensic approach detectives take when examining an event from the past, the rest will take care of itself. I'm confident the claims of Christianity are supported by the evidence, and I believe a *forensic faith* will comfortably survive in the age of reason. Boghossian and I are engaged in a race of sorts. Both of us understand the importance of the evidence, and we are trying to reach the same group of accidental Christians. The only question is who will reach them first.

THE CASE FOR CASE MAKING

I want to share an awkward truth with you. Although this is little more than anecdotal evidence, I do think it illustrates what C. S. Lewis described all those years ago. About half of my speaking engagements are in churches where I am asked to talk to the congregation about the reliability of the Gospels, the reasonable inference of the resurrection, or the evidence for God's existence. In many of these churches, the people I meet aren't really interested in Christian "apologetics" (the discipline of making the case for Christianity). In fact, most are still completely unfamiliar with the word, and some even reject the value of such an effort. On more than one occasion, I've heard a well-meaning believer say something akin to, "Well, that's nice, but I don't really need any evidence. I just believe Christianity is true. I don't really think you can argue someone into the kingdom anyway." When I encounter this kind of response, I know I have my work cut out for me. Before I can make the case for Christianity, I have to make the case for *making the case*.

That's what I hope to do here in *Forensic Faith*. In my previous books, I made the case for Christianity (*Cold-Case Christianity*) and God's existence (*God's Crime Scene*). But if you're not convinced of the need for a more intellectually robust, thoughtful version of Christianity, my prior case-making books will be of little value to you.



If You Understand the Importance of Evidence, You're Far More Likely to Examine the Case

When Christians see a crisis, we typically respond passionately. We readily rescue those devastated by natural disaster, feed the hungry, and do our best to meet the needs of the impoverished. We have a history of doing whatever it takes to respond to real human challenges. Well, there's another real challenge on the horizon. Christians (especially *young* Christians) are leaving the church in record numbers. Surveys and polls have been exposing this disturbing trend for many years now:

Most teenagers are incredibly inarticulate about their religious beliefs and practices. They typically cannot defend what they believe.

Young, uninformed believers also reject important Christian claims. Sixty-three percent of teenage Christians don't believe Jesus is the Son of God; 51 percent don't believe Jesus rose from the dead; 68 percent don't believe the Holy Spirit is a real Being.

Between 60 percent and 80 percent of people aged 15 to 30 will leave the church for at least a season, and most will never return.

Only 33 percent of young, churching Christians said the church will play a part in their lives when they leave home.

If current trends related to the belief systems and practices of young people continue, church attendance will decline by 50 percent in the next decade. College professors are nearly five times more likely to be professing atheists or agnostics than people in the general population. The vast majority of university professors reject the Bible as “the actual word of God.” When surveyed, the largest segment of young, ex-Christian respondents said they left Christianity because they had intellectual doubt, skepticism, and unanswered questions.³

If you're a Christian, you already know the sad truth. Someone in your family (a son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, niece, or nephew) has already walked away, in spite of all the years you spent raising them in the church. I believe we can change this alarming trajectory, but we have to be willing to address the problem head on. If we are willing to do what it takes to respond to the trials facing the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, why won't we do what it takes to respond to the challenges facing our own Christian family?

I write about the evidence for Christianity several times a week and post these articles (along with videos and podcasts) on my website (www.ColdCaseChristianity.com). I often get emails from readers. One young man named Andrew Deane recently sent this message:⁴

My Dad was a Southern Baptist Preacher and while I was growing up I basically lived at the church. I knew all of the bible stories and was even baptized when I was eight ... After graduating high school, I went to college to get a degree in mechanical engineering. One might think a degree of this kind would involve little to no discussion of whether or not God exists, or if Jesus was a real person, but I encountered these and many more objections.

I had a literature class where the professor gave a presentation on how Jesus was copied from other gods and how this explained away the “mythology” of Jesus. I had an electromagnetics course in which the professor viciously attacked the concept of intelligent design ... I had a space technology class in which the professor vehemently argued for the existence of aliens but refused to acknowledge the existence of God. These are just a few examples from the many interactions I had with my professors.

Unfortunately, most of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are severely lacking in training, and when they encounter even the weakest arguments, they are not prepared ... As a Christian in the college setting, you are being constantly challenged, constantly poked and prodded. It is easy to throw your hands in the air, becoming convinced your faith is a lie when you are being trampled every day by both professors and by peers. All Christians, but especially ones in college, must know what they believe and why they believe it if they have any hope of surviving with their faith intact ... I think of college almost like an atheist ambush. The Christians are walking in totally unaware of the danger until it is too late and the damage has already been done.

That's why I wanted to take the time to thank you ... When I entered college, I was struggling with many of the objections I encountered. I discovered your podcast and your careful research. The evidentiary approach was incredibly helpful. As a result, I actually exited college with my faith even stronger than when I began. I want to encourage you to keep up the good work.

Young Christians struggle when challenged (as Andrew did), but this doesn't have to be the case. If properly equipped, they could actually *grow* in their faith and confidence, even in the midst of strong opposition. You and I have the opportunity to reach the young people we love, including young Christians like Andrew, if we are willing to embrace the mission.

Our children, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, are in the right place; they believe something *true*. If they've come to understand their own need for a Savior and have repented and placed their trust in Jesus alone for their salvation, they are saved for eternity. But if they haven't taken the time to study *why* Christianity is true, like Alan (my partner in the crime scene), they will be ill-equipped to answer objections and less than persuasive with a group that requires far more evidence than ever before. We have to change the course of the church in order to meet this challenge, and the church is much more like an ocean liner than a jet ski. We cannot turn it on a dime. Instead, we must make small course corrections—one degree here and one degree there. *Forensic Faith* is my effort to come alongside the church as a tugboat and shift the direction of our ocean liner one degree at a time.

TO PROTECT AND TO SERVE

In 1955, the Los Angeles Police Department ran a contest for a motto they could use at their police academy. They told contestants the motto should express, in just a few words, the

“ideals to which the Los Angeles police service is dedicated.” The winning entry was submitted by Officer Joseph Dorobek. “To Protect and to Serve” has been emblazoned on Los Angeles Police cars ever since and has, in many ways, become the adopted motto of law enforcement personnel across the country.



Police officers are called to *serve* and to *protect*. You don't enter this profession unless this mission is part of your DNA. Officers understand their sworn duty, train rigorously in preparation for their mission, and learn how to investigate and discern the truth so they can ultimately communicate this truth to a jury. Every day is a *call to action*.

As a church, we can learn something from this resolute approach to mission. As Christians, we have a similar duty. The apostle Peter said we are called to *serve* one another with “sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (1 Peter 3:8 ESV) and called to *protect* the truth by “being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (verse 15 ESV). Christians are called to *serve* and *protect*. If we want to fulfill this duty, we'll need to train rigorously so we can investigate and communicate the truth. I hope *Forensic Faith* is *your* call to action. It's time to change course. It's time to raise the bar. It's time to get serious. It's time to embrace our distinct duty as Christians.