

Embracing
a Confident
Faith

DESPITE DOUBT

MICHAEL E.
WITTMER

“Everybody doubts. Christians doubt. Atheists doubt. Scholars doubt; students doubt. Your pastor doubts and you doubt. Michael Wittmer takes this common phenomenon and shows us how our doubts can enrich our faith.”

—Haddon Robinson, author and Harold John Ockenga
Distinguished Professor of Preaching,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“If you’ve ever struggled with doubts about God, the Bible, or the reality of your personal faith (and who hasn’t?), this book is for you. Michael Wittmer fearlessly addresses these issues head-on, providing careful, honest, and gracious answers that make sense and give the reader a framework for a more confident and grounded faith.”

—Larry Osborne, author and pastor,
North Coast Church, Vista, CA

“I know from my own spiritual journey that misunderstanding doubt will trip you up. This is why I am happy to encourage you to read and digest Michael Wittmer’s very helpful *Despite Doubt*. He addresses the doubts of the mind and the heart and shows how they can coexist with robust faith. This book will greatly assist the conscientious Christian for whom honest wonderings can feel like unbelief. Let Wittmer lead you through your doubts to authentic belief.”

—Steve DeWitt, Senior Pastor, Bethel Church,
Crown Point, IN, and author of
Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything

“Rather than rebuke or discourage readers, Michael Wittmer has supplied them with help to realize they have ample reasons to believe the claims of Christ. Written in clear, non-technical terms and a conversational style, this book should dispel the doubts of many and strengthen the faith of those who already believe. It deserves careful attention from all who wrestle with problems of doubt.”

—James E. McGoldrick, Professor of Church History, Greenville
Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC

“Mike Wittmer is to systematic theology what Carl Trueman is to historical theology: witty and full of (edifying) verve.”

—Andy Naselli, Assistant Professor of
New Testament and Biblical Theology,
Bethlehem College and Seminary,
Minneapolis, MN

“Michael Wittmer brilliantly helped me discover that while there is nothing wrong with doubt, there is everything right with faith. As I read from one chapter to the next, I found myself caught up in the undeniably profound wonders of the fully trustworthy God of the Bible. I ‘of little faith’ realized my puny faith is okay, yet I will get to watch it grow as I daily experience the powerhouse truths of God’s Word.”

—Doug Fagerstrom, Senior Vice President,
Converge Worldwide

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DISCOVERY HOUSE

P U B L I S H E R S ®

Feeding the Soul with the Word of God

Despite Doubt: Embracing a Confident Faith

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*For Tim, Randy, and Phil,
Faithful brothers who passed on what we have received.*

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Chapter 1

DOUBT AWAY

For what is more miserable than uncertainty?

MARTIN LUTHER

I have my doubts. How about you?

I have stood beside a casket and studied the dead man's face, looking for signs that he was alive someplace else. I believed his soul was in heaven, but how could I know for sure?

I have heard scientists cite evidence from fossils or the human genome to assert that no serious person could believe the Bible. Their confidence unnerved me, and I wondered whether they might be right.

I have watched Buddhist parents playing with their children, and I winced when I imagined what they would think about me if they knew what I thought about them. Was I mean to believe this family was in danger of hell if they did not repent of their sin and believe in Jesus? I suddenly understood why many people insist that all religions lead to God. It does make it easier to get along with others.

Doubts sometimes intrude when I'm reading Scripture. Every now and then I close my Bible and sigh, "Did that really happen?" Did Lot's wife turn into a pillar of salt, the Nile River turn into blood, and fire fall from the sky to consume Elijah's sacrifice? Did a

virgin give birth to a Son, and did this Son grow up to give sight to the blind and legs to the lame, feed thousands with five loaves and two fish, and rise from the dead? *Really?*

Such questions are occupational hazards for Christians in the twenty-first century. Anyone who is paying attention is bound to have them now and again. If these doubts have crossed your mind—and especially if they camped out for a while, pitching their tent on your tattered faith—then part 1 of this book is for you.

Perhaps you are plagued by another kind of doubt. You have no problem believing in God or the Bible, but you wonder whether you are truly following Him. If the path to life is as narrow as Jesus said, then it might be easy to miss. Jesus warned that many people will lead very religious lives only to hear at the end, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matthew 7:23).

This can be terrifying. I attend church, read the Bible, pray, and reach out to those who are worse off than me. But when I read what Jesus demands—“Sell everything you have and give to the poor” (Luke 18:22)—I sometimes wonder whether I am even saved. I hear stories of saints who have sacrificed everything to follow Christ, and I wonder whether my life is too ordinary to be Christian. If I was really born again, wouldn’t I be more radical?

I remind myself that salvation comes by faith and not by works. True enough. But how do I know I have faith? “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13), but how can I tell that my call is sincere? Jesus might be the Savior of the world, but how can I be sure He has saved *me*?

If you have wondered what God wants from you—and especially if you have shuddered from the terror that you might not be saved—then part 2 is for you.

Christians struggle with both types of doubt. Sometimes we wrestle with the objective doubts expressed in part 1:

Does God exist?

Is Jesus His Son?

Is the Bible His Word?

And sometimes we ponder the subjective questions of part 2:

Am I doing all that Jesus expects from me?

Am I even saved?

How would I know?

My response to both groups of doubt is expressed in the title of this chapter: “Doubt Away.” This ambiguous phrase can be taken in one of two ways, and I mean both of them.

First, you should feel free to “doubt away.” Doubts are essentially questions, and since asking questions is the only path to finding answers, you should go ahead and doubt. Frederick Buechner explains, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” Have you sat through a class or sermon on a subject you knew thoroughly? You didn’t have any questions about the day’s topic, and you struggled to pay attention, let alone learn something. The teacher may have tossed out many important facts, but since they were answers to questions you didn’t have, they failed to rouse your imagination.

Every discovery begins with doubt, and the largest doubts lead to the biggest breakthroughs. Job dared to charge God with injustice, “Why have you made me your target?” “Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?” (Job 7:20; 13:24). When God finally gave Job his day in court, Job realized that he was the one on trial, and he pled no contest. “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know,” he said. “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3, 6).

John the Baptist risked offending Jesus by asking, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” Jesus did not disparage John for his doubts but used the opportunity to clarify the gospel ministry of the Messiah (Matthew 11:2–6). Though sinless, Jesus himself endured history’s most excruciating doubt. On the cross He became so distraught He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). The answer to that question holds the foundation of our salvation.

You must give yourself permission to doubt because really, what is the alternative? If you stifle your doubts and pretend you don’t have any questions, you are stuffing a time bomb in your shorts. It’s bound to go off later and at the worst possible time, when the shrapnel from your blowout may wipe out others whose faith looks to you.

When you stop and struggle through your doubts, you inoculate your faith against such tragedies. Most children receive the MMR vaccine, which immunizes them against measles, mumps, and rubella. This shot contains live viruses of all three diseases—not enough to make the children sick but enough to stimulate their bodies’ defenses to fight back. An immune system that has successfully practiced on small doses can fend off an entire army of viruses when they come.

I was born before the MMR vaccine was invented, and I remember the itching and chafing from my childhood case of the measles. But I did get my spiritual vaccine. When I was in junior high I climbed an apricot tree in my front yard and pondered the existence of God. My adolescent mind chased the arguments back and forth, and after a period of several months—not lived entirely in the tree—I concluded that I did believe in God. I did not wrestle through all of the arguments I would later encounter, but my small bout with skepticism did inoculate me against more virulent strains. Now it would take an extremely powerful argument to make me reconsider my faith in God, and I doubt it could be done.

But despite its benefits, doubt—especially the bratty kind that stamps its feet and demands your attention—is not necessary for a life of faith. This is the second meaning of this chapter’s title, “Doubt Away.” Christians are known as “believers,” so we are people who need something to believe. We don’t doubt for doubt’s sake. We ponder our questions, not to feed sugar to our doubts but so we can lull them to sleep. It’s a good day when you put a doubt to bed, or at least hear it saying its bedtime prayers. The tiny tyrant is no longer terrorizing your day, and he will soon be sleeping as peacefully as your faith.

Some Christians mistakenly coddle doubt. They wish it wouldn’t pester them with nagging questions, but what can you expect from a modern child? Our secular age makes it difficult to believe in Jesus, so perhaps the best we can do is make a virtue out of our doubt. If faith requires risk, then maybe it’s a good thing that we don’t know for sure. After all, how can we take the leap of faith if we know in advance how our jump will end? And so we conclude

that knowledge rather than doubt is the enemy of faith. The less we know, the more space we open for the leap of faith.

But this leap *of* faith is often a leap *from* faith. Faith does not mean acting against our better judgment, jumping into the void and trusting God to take care of us. Christians aren't required to begin each day with shouts of "Geronimo!" Faith means to trust or commit to something, and the wisest believers rely on what they know, not what they don't.

If faith requires knowledge, then the important question is not "What are your doubts?" but "What do you know?" The encouraging surprise of this book is that you may know more than you think—more than enough to believe, more than enough to put your doubts away.

Part 1

BELIEF IN GOD

Chapter 2

SKEPTICISM

Faith is believing what you know isn't true.

MARK TWAIN

Recently I was riding as a passenger in a car. When we stopped for a red light, I looked out my window and noticed that jagged fingers of wood were shredding off a nearby telephone pole. I cringed to think how easily a passing jogger might brush up against the pole and pick up splinters. The menacing shards turned my thoughts to Jesus. How it must have hurt His hands and feet to be nailed with spikes to such rough lumber! I shuddered and tried not to imagine it.

So my thoughts ran in another direction. The solidity of the telephone pole reminded me that the cross was real. A man named Jesus was nailed to a post like that. But then I thought, what if He wasn't? How did I know the gospel stories are true? Or what if He was, but it doesn't change anything? How does the horrific death of a condemned Jew on the other side of the world in a different millennium affect my life today? It is comforting to think that Jesus' death bought me everlasting life, but what if I'm wrong? Then I will simply disappear when I die, like any dog, flower, or fly.

For a moment, it seemed as if a hole in the universe had opened

up. I had climbed up and out, and I was looking down on the world from above. I felt that maybe I was seeing the way things really are, for the first time. Then a wave of nausea washed over me, and I snapped out of it. I was surprised by my sudden doubts. I have been a Christian for more than forty years, yet the mere sight of a telephone pole had rattled my faith in less than a minute. How is that possible?

I suspect my doubting daydream says less about the weakness of my faith and more about the strength of skepticism in my world. I live in a secular age, when even committed believers walk a razor's edge between faith and nagging doubt. In his award-winning book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explains that our secular period is a new development in human history. About two hundred years ago it became markedly more difficult for Europeans and Americans to believe in God. Atheists and agnostics argue that this secular step is a sign of growth. After thousands of years we have finally matured into adults who know too much to believe. Christians counter that this secular stage may turn out to be nothing more than a blip, a phase through which every adolescent must pass. Western society grew strong on its belief in God, and once it works through its doubts it may turn to Him again.

Both sides agree that our time is different. There have always been atheists, such as the ancient Epicureans, but they were outliers. Atheists swam against the tide; they had to work at not believing in God. But now atheism, or at least agnosticism (there may be a God but I can't know Him), seems like our culture's default position. We start from skepticism, and we will only believe in God if we find enough evidence to prove His existence. We still may believe in God, but we must fight our way there. Being a Christian today is hard work. It's possible, but it's also tiring.

This chapter and the next one are not going to solve the problem of believing in God—the rest of Part 1 attempts to do that—but they aim to help us understand our predicament. Why is it so hard to believe today? Why does the Christian faith seem like it's merely one option among many, and often not even the best option? How did we get *here*?

Victims of Our Success

Until recently, Westerners assumed the world was enchanted with the presence of God. Medieval Christians would lift their eyes to heaven, bask in the warmth of the sun on their face, and believe they were feeling God's kind embrace. They often took a rustle of leaves as a sign that God was passing by, and they interpreted near misses of lightning and booming thunder as the expression of God's displeasure.

Martin Luther was sure that the fierce storm that rolled in on him was God's way of telling him to leave law school. He panicked and cried out to St. Anne, pledging to become a monk if she would spare his life. Why St. Anne? She was the patron saint of miners (Luther's dad was a copper miner) and those caught in thunderstorms. So Luther's prayer was a twofer. The storm eventually passed and Luther kept his vow and entered a monastery, which set off a chain of events that changed the course of history.

This week a string of angry tornadoes ripped through a large American city, lifting eighteen-wheeler tractor trailers one hundred feet into the air and twirling them around like toys before hurling them to the ground. The television anchor happily noted there were no fatalities, but he did not thank God or even ask what message God might be sending. He simply broke away to a meteorologist, who explained that this impressive "act of nature" occurred because a spinning upper mass of cold air slammed into a stationary front, which had been unseasonably warmed by record-setting temperatures.

I am not suggesting that God was sending a special message to this city, but I noticed the meteorologist seemed confident that his scientific account had sufficiently explained the tornadoes. He may be surprised to learn that the very science that left God out of the conversation could not have arisen without Him.

It's not a coincidence that modern science sprouted in the West. Eastern religions claim that the physical world is merely an illusion, so there is no point in studying it. Buddhism produces few scientists. But Western Christians learned from Scripture that this world

is real and good because God made it. They read that God put us on Earth to govern and develop this world on His behalf (Genesis 2:15). So when we research the mating habits of blue whales, the migratory patterns of red-tailed hawks, and the family squabbles of meerkats, we are obeying the first command God ever gave us, to “Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

This biblical worldview inspired scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, and Galileo to study the universe and expand our mastery over it. They kick-started modern science, which has improved our lives beyond their wildest dreams. Modern science delivered indoor plumbing, smartphones, and medication for high blood pressure, which we need to cope with our smartphones. We have gone to the moon, and back.

But our scientific achievements have cost us spiritually. The more power we gained over nature, the less we thought we needed God. Do you see the irony? We studied nature because God commanded us, but we got so good at it we supposed we could take His place. Who needs God when you can solve your problems on your own?

Initially we kept God around as a security blanket. We became deists who believed there was a God who watched over us, but He lived far away and would not interfere with our lives. God had wound the world like a clock and let it go, to run entirely by the consistent tick-tick-tick of natural law. Learn these laws, and you will unlock the mysteries of the universe. We no longer expected God to miraculously intervene in our world, nor did we think we needed Him to. He created the laws of nature, and we could take it from there.

It’s a short step from a distant God to a nonexistent God, and deism soon dissolved into naturalism. This secular worldview believes the universe is all there is. There is no God, no souls, and no afterlife. You live, you die, and then you fade away, never to be seen or heard from again. This is a depressing viewpoint, as even its supporters acknowledge.

People of the Middle Ages believed that humans were the focus of creation. We stood between heaven and earth, the image bearers

of God on the planet that was the stationary center of the universe. But as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo obeyed God's command to study His world, they discovered that we were not even the center of our own galaxy, for the earth revolved around the sun. They insisted that we were still important, for Scripture said God had placed us here to steward this world on His behalf. But eventually even this belief groaned and gave way beneath an avalanche of scientific discovery.

We felt ourselves growing up, and soon we were too smart to believe a religious book taught to children. We were in charge now, and the more we learned to control nature the less we depended on God until finally we displaced Him altogether. Our rise was also our demise, for there is no value in bearing God's image if God no longer exists. The moment we believed we were gods was the moment we destroyed ourselves.

And so our culture is stuck. We cower before the consequences of not believing in God, yet our grown-up minds demand proof that we know isn't there. We want to believe in God; we just don't think we can.

But wait. Backed against the wall by the ruthless skepticism of science, we reach into our pockets and feel a grenade. It's a foolish idea that probably won't work, but desperate people will try just about anything. Brace yourself, for our problem is about to get a whole lot worse.

Chapter 3

PLURALISM

*Do you think I care whether you call me Yahweh,
Jehovah, Allah, Wakantonka, Brahma, Father,
Mother, or even the Void of Nirvana?*

PAUL HARVEY

Last chapter explored why we often feel it's hard to believe. This chapter explains how our culture tries to free up space for faith, but only makes matters worse. Fair warning: this chapter contains a fair amount of philosophy. I worked hard to make it easy to understand, though you may want to read slowly to fully grasp each point. If you want to know why our culture makes it difficult to believe that Jesus is the only way to God—and even harder to say so in public—then this chapter is for you.

What could be worse than not knowing whether there is a God? Believing that there is a God who dwells beyond our world, higher than we can imagine, and only that. God must be high above us or He is not God. But He also must break into our world and speak to us or we cannot know anything about Him. And if we can't know God, we have no way to tell which religion is right and which is wrong. Maybe they're all right, each in its own way. So let a thousand flowers bloom, and pick the religion that most resonates

with you. Can't find one you like? Then make up your own or go without—just say you're "spiritual but not religious."

And just like that, our secular age gives way to a smorgasbord of spirituality. Modern people demand proof for whatever they believe, and since it's impossible to prove something they can't touch or see, they suppose they must do the honest thing and stop believing in God. Here is one way out: We could say the problem is us. Maybe our small minds are too slow to see God. This sounds like a humble solution to our crisis of faith, but as we'll see, it actually frees us to fill the concept of God with whatever content we like. This is the story of the modern world.

From No God to the Unknown God

Secularism announced its arrival in the philosophy of David Hume, who argued that the existence of evil is a compelling reason to doubt the existence of God. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume noted that if beauty and goodness point toward God, then the insufferable presence of evil should count against Him. Hume joked that perhaps our world was made by a young God who was just starting out. Our world was His first attempt, and He hadn't yet worked out the bugs. Or perhaps it was made by an old God, past His prime—the Brett Favre of gods—who wanted one last go before He retired. Or perhaps this world was made by a divine committee. Committees argue and leave loose ends, and so our world doesn't quite work as it should. Hume concluded that the evidence for God is mixed, and since modern people believe only what they can prove, they have no choice but to give up belief in God. Such skepticism may lead to despair, but at least they are being honest.

Hume's arguments startled another eighteenth-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant agreed there wasn't enough evidence to prove God's existence, but he knew he had to find a way to believe in God, otherwise life would lose all meaning. So Kant made a daring attempt to rescue belief in God, and two centuries later, the legacy of his "rescue" still lingers.

Kant noted that our lack of evidence for God may say more about us than about Him. Our five senses are good at detecting smells and sounds in the natural world, but they are unable to access anything we can't touch, taste, or see. Why should we expect that our natural senses would find indisputable evidence for a supernatural Spirit? A heavenly being would obviously exist beyond what our earthly minds can perceive. We can't know God because our minds are limited, not because He doesn't exist.

Kant divided the world into two parts. The lower story, what he called the *phenomenal* world, is the *world of knowledge*. We may know whatever phenomenon our five senses perceive. I know an apple pie is baking because I smell it; the robin is hopping in the grass because I see it, and so forth. The upper story, what Kant called the *noumenal* world, is the *world of faith*. This world lies beyond what our minds can know, but not what they may believe. We may not *know* that God exists, for He is not something we can see, hear, or touch, but we are still permitted to *believe* in Him.

But why should we believe in a God we cannot know? Kant was an ethicist, and he gave a practical reason: only belief in God can ground morality. If people did not believe in God, then they would readily harm others without fear of eternal consequences. But if they believed there was a God who would reward or punish their behavior, they just might try to live better. So while Kant conceded that he could not know God, he claimed it was still important to believe in Him.

FROM SKEPTICISM TO FIDEISM

Hume's Skepticism: There is insufficient evidence to prove God, so we cannot know Him.

Kant's Fideism: There is insufficient evidence to disprove God, so we may still believe in Him.

God Has Many Names

Kant's separation of faith and knowledge may have been a desperate attempt to rescue belief in God, but it is a powerfully attractive idea to modern people. First, it not only gives them the security of believing in God, but also in a strange way it makes their belief secure. If people don't know that God exists, then no amount of evidence or argument can make them unknow it. They aren't claiming they *know* God exists, so it's impossible to prove them wrong. They are fideists—people who believe for no good reason—and their belief in God is unassailable, at least to them.

Second, it enables them to winsomely accept the “truth” of other religions. If God is unknowable, then no one has a revelation that tells them what God is like. No one can claim their religion is right and another is wrong. Most religions are equally acceptable ways to God, for they all are merely human attempts to speak about what cannot be known.

In this way Kant's separation of faith and knowledge provides intellectual cover for what many people want to be true. We meet devout followers of other religions online, in restaurants, and at neighborhood block parties, and we'd like to think the afterlife will turn out all right for them. Every aspect of life now comes with an embarrassingly high number of choices—my grocery store carries sixty-six brands and varieties of mustard!—so why wouldn't the same hold true for religion? As a *Newsweek* cover proclaimed, “We are all Hindus now,” meaning most Americans believe there are many paths up the mountain to God. A Pew Forum survey found that 65 percent of religiously affiliated Americans—and 47 percent of white evangelicals and 49 percent of black Protestants—agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life.”

Pluralism seems like our patriotic duty after the religious terrorism of 9/11, for anyone who claims they have the only way to God sounds as dangerous and divisive as al-Qaeda. Presidents, columnists, and talk show hosts encourage us to open our minds to the religious views of others. Oprah said that “One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe there is only one way. Actually,

there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God.” When she ended her program’s twenty-five year run, Oprah closed her final show by clarifying what she meant by the term “God”:

For all of you who get riled up when I mention God, and want to know which God I am talking about—I’m talking about the same one you’re talking about. I’m talking about the Alpha and Omega. The omniscient, the omnipresent, the ultimate consciousness, the source, the force, the all of everything there is, the one and only G-O-D. That’s the one I’m talking about.

Like many Americans, Oprah doesn’t think it matters what we call God because in the end we’re all talking about the same person.

Third, Kant’s separation of faith and knowledge empowers people to create their own religion. If God is unknowable, then we are free to fill in the blank with whatever we prefer. Does “Father, Son, and Spirit” sound too masculine to your ears? Then call Him “Mother, Daughter, and Friend.” Are you put off by the possibility of hell? Simply delete that part. No one knows what God is like anyhow, so you are free to make Him or Her up as you go. And so our world is full of people who claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” They are spiritual because they believe in God, but they are not about to let any religion tell them what they must believe. They are religious tinkers, dabbling in this religion and that to cobble together a God they can believe in.

It’s easy to see how this Do-It-Yourself Religion quickly degenerates into a projection of our individual selves. As we fill in the blank with our personal preferences, everyone’s God becomes nothing more than a larger version of their best self. And so we combine the comfort of believing in God with the pleasure of being God. The real God can’t tell us what He is like or what He wants us to do, for then we would know something about Him. We enjoy the benefit of believing in God and the freedom to do what we want.

How does this work in practice? As with Kant, Oprah refused to allow the presence of evil to eliminate her belief in God. She praised God for lifting her out of poverty and abuse to host the highest-rated talk show in television history, and she inspired millions of women to own their mistakes and trust God to help them rise through the pain. But just as Kant projected his own preferences upon God (making Him the ground of morality), so Oprah turned God into what she felt she needed—a nonjudgmental therapist who empowers us to reach our personal best.

Like other Do-It-Yourselfers, Oprah created a God that seems to be an extension of herself. She endorsed New Age books such as *The Secret*, which declares that we have the spiritual power to change our world through positive thoughts or “vibrations.” Our minds are powerful magnets that attract either health and wealth when we are happy or disease and disaster when we are sad. Oprah promoted Elizabeth Gilbert’s memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, in which Gilbert confessed to liking everything about Jesus except “that one fixed rule of Christianity” that “Christ is the *only* path to God” (emphasis hers). So Gilbert used the generic name “God” when she prayed, though she said she could just as easily have referred to Him or Her as “Jehovah, Allah, Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu, or Zeus.” It ultimately didn’t matter, for Gilbert said that the god who answered her prayer was her very own voice.

Do you see why pluralism is even worse than skepticism, and is its logical next step? Modern skepticism swept away belief in the Christian God. But people are going to worship something (Romans 1:18–32), so it wasn’t long until they replaced secularism’s “no God” with pluralism’s “any god will do.” Maybe they couldn’t know God, but they could still believe in whichever deity they chose. And since their new belief in God rests on faith rather than knowledge, it’s difficult to talk them out of it. How can you reason with someone who doesn’t claim to have knowledge?

This separation of faith and knowledge is logically impossible. How can you believe in a God who is unknowable? How would you even know that He is unknowable? If you knew that He is unknow-

able, then He would no longer be unknowable, for you would know *something* about Him.

Besides being untenable, the separation of faith and knowledge is the quickest way to lose your faith. Those who are willing to believe everything are liable to believe anything, and they almost certainly will be wrong. Yet despite the danger in divorcing faith and knowledge, many people still fall for it. Even Christians, as I will explain in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

LEAP

Might as well jump. Jump! Might as well jump.

DAVID LEE ROTH

Elizabeth Gilbert had made it. She had a good job writing for *GQ* magazine that enabled her to buy a home in the Hudson Valley and an apartment in Manhattan, which she shared with her good-enough husband. She was living the dream, until she had trouble getting pregnant. Her barrenness led her to reevaluate her life, and she realized she didn't really want children, or her marriage.

So Gilbert left her husband and hooked up with a younger man. When that relationship began to fail, she quit her job and asked her publisher for a book advance so she could travel the world to find herself. She searched for happiness in the food of Italy, the spirituality of India, and the arms of a Brazilian in Bali. Then she wrote about it in her best-selling memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Gilbert's troubled marriage inspired her to pray for the first time in her life, but the god who responded sounded a lot like her. When she pleaded, "Please tell me what to do," she said she heard "my own voice, speaking from within my own self. But this was my voice as I had never heard it before." The voice said, "Go back to bed." In a few months her inner voice led her to divorce her husband, find a

new lover, and study with an Indian guru, who taught her to begin each morning by meditating on the Sanskrit mantra, "I honor the divinity that resides within me."

Listening to the voice seems to have paid off for Gilbert, as her book became a *New York Times* bestseller and a movie starring Julia Roberts. She became rich. She even married the Brazilian.

And she credits God. She concedes that heeding the voice within her might seem foolish, but she believes that faith in God requires "a mighty jump from the rational over to the unknowable." She explains:

If faith were rational, it wouldn't be—by definition—faith. Faith is belief in what you cannot see or prove or touch. Faith is walking face-first and full-speed into the dark. If we truly knew all the answers in advance as to the meaning of life and the nature of God and the destiny of our souls, our belief would not be a leap of faith and it would not be a courageous act of humanity; it would just be . . . a prudent insurance policy.

Notice how she sharply separates faith from knowledge. She believes faith is "a courageous act" only when it runs "full-speed into the dark," relying upon what it does not know. She is sure she has faith only when her faith is unsure. Faith must be a blind leap or it doesn't count.

Every Christian would reject Gilbert's claim to be God (she writes, "I am divine"), but many seem to agree with her assumption that faith and knowledge do not mix. They suggest that knowledge gets in the way of our faith in God, and perhaps attempting to make a virtue out of our doubts, propose that some measure of ignorance and uncertainty is necessary. They argue that it's a good thing we don't possess certain knowledge of God, for those who are sure they know God find it impossible to believe in Him, freely choose Him, or truly love Him. This view is widespread, but is it right?

Do We Need Doubt to Believe?

Recently I attended a lecture by a popular preacher who insisted that faith is the opposite of knowledge. He illustrated the point by making a fist and asking an audience member if she thought it contained a twenty dollar bill. She said she believed it did, because she had read the same example in his book. After joking that he would have her escorted from the hall for ruining his bit, he said “I will destroy your faith by opening my hand and showing you that it’s there. Now that you know I have a twenty dollar bill, you can no longer have faith that I do.” He explained, “Faith is required only when we have doubts, when we do not know for sure. When knowledge comes, faith is no more.”

Is it true that “when knowledge comes, faith is no more”? If this is correct, then the return of Christ will destroy the faith of His followers, for our faith will now be sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus would not have told Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed” (John 20:29), but rather “Because you have seen me, you are no longer able to believe.” Would Jesus ask, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8), if He knew His coming would obliterate any faith He found here?

Knowledge actually strengthens faith, for it reduces the hesitancy that comes from uncertainty. Faith means to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the promises of God. Right now this commitment includes a measure of uncertainty because we have not yet received all that God has promised. Jesus’ return will remove this uncertainty but not our faith, for we will still need to know and trust the promises of God on the New Earth. It will just be easier, because it will be clearer, when we see Jesus. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Paul declares that our knowledge will increase when we see Jesus; he does not say our faith will take a corresponding hit.

The separation of faith from knowledge is the fast train to crazy town. A pastor preached a sermon on Romans 14:23, “everything that does not come from faith is sin.” He declared that we sin

whenever we claim to know something about God, for if we have no doubts, then we are not acting in faith. He warned the congregation not to say even that they know God is good or that Jesus is Lord. If they *know* that He is good or that He is Lord, then they cannot *believe* that He is—and if they do not believe these things, they are living in sin. Besides the difficulty of trying not to know what I believe—and the guilt of thinking that I am sinning if I am not successful—I wonder what the pastor would do with Paul’s confident confession that “I know whom I have believed” (2 Timothy 1:12)? Is it really a sin to say I know God?

Do We Need Doubt to Choose?

Many Christians assert that doubt is necessary to protect our freedom. They say that God could pick up a celestial bullhorn and thunder, “I am God; serve me or else,” but then we would be forced to believe and obey Him. God wants us to love Him freely, so He purposefully keeps us in the dark. He gives us enough evidence to believe in Him, but He does not reveal so much that we are unable to reject Him.

I agree that God never coerces anyone against their will, but I wonder whether He protects our freedom with strategic ambiguity. If undeniable knowledge of God and the consequences of sin compel us to follow Him, then how do we explain the many people in Scripture who possessed both but disobeyed anyway? Consider our very first sin, the original sin that corrupted the human race and supplies the template for every sin. Adam clearly heard the voice of God warning him not to eat the forbidden fruit or he would die, yet he knowingly bit the fruit when it was offered by his wife.

Or consider the main event of the Old Testament. Pharaoh initially refused to allow Israel to leave Egypt because he did not know the Lord or why he should obey Him (Exodus 5:2). “Fair enough,” God seemed to say, and He set about to reveal himself by a series of escalating plagues. Pharaoh’s magicians copied the Lord’s initial miracles, turning a staff into a snake, water into blood, and calling up frogs from the Nile. But they were unable to create gnats from

the dust and they conceded, “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19). The Lord’s existence and the consequences for disobeying Him became progressively more evident as God punished Egypt with flies, plague, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the death of their firstborn sons. But though his officials warned him that “Egypt is ruined” (Exodus 10:7), Pharaoh refused to repent before the God who had bested him and instead angrily threatened the life of Moses, His messenger (Exodus 10:28). If clear knowledge of God and the consequences of sin coerce obedience, then Pharaoh would have become a follower of the Lord by plague number three.*

And what about those who were on the right side of this redemption? The Israelites saw God deliver them from Egypt and they sang, “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11). But before the chapter was out they were grumbling for water and before too long they had completely lost their faith and were left to die in the desert. If unmistakable knowledge of God’s existence compels obedience, then the Israelites would not have worshiped a golden calf in the shadow of the mountain that thundered and quaked with the Lord’s presence.

The biblical story on sin ends as it began. John’s vision of the seven bowls in Revelation echoes the ten plagues of Egypt. God’s wrath turns the sea and fresh water into blood, scorches sinners with intense heat and painful sores, and pummels them with hundred-pound hail and a devastating earthquake. The victims of this destruction are not forced to follow God, but though surrounded with the certainty of His existence and the consequences for disobedience, they “cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done” (Revelation 16:11).

* Perceptive readers might wonder if it’s fair to use Pharaoh as an example of willful unbelief since Scripture says, “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 9:12). As finite creatures we cannot comprehend how God sovereignly directs human lives without violating their freedom, but Scripture teaches that He does. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, but it’s also true that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15, 32). Regardless of God’s role, He still holds Pharaoh responsible for not responding to the evidence he requested.

We should not be surprised by the biblical record. Consider why we disobey God. Do we sin because we doubt God's existence or because, like the Israelites, we are stubborn, "stiff-necked people" (Exodus 32:9)? If knowledge of God and of hell compel obedience, then those of us who confidently believe in both should never sin. But we do. So it seems that neither of these eliminate the freedom that is essential to faith.

Do We Need Doubt to Love and Be Loved?

Besides faith and free choice, we sometimes hear that uncertainty is necessary for the give-and-take of our personal relationship with God. One author asserts that certainty undermines the freedom and trust that fuel intimacy. We seek certainty among impersonal objects that we wish to control, but when we attempt to gain indubitable knowledge of another person we inevitably disrespect their freedom and suffocate our relationship. Intimacy occurs only when we give each other space and trust them to be faithful when we are not around.

The author explains that he could remove any doubt about his wife's faithfulness by keeping her under twenty-four-hour surveillance, but the knowledge gained by his video camera would demolish the trust and freedom of their relationship. He is right about that, but would their trust be ruined by his certainty or by the sneaky way he acquired it? Would his wife be angry because he knew she was faithful or because he spied on her?

His hypothetical video camera is not the cause of distrust and their broken relationship but rather the symptom of it. Anyone who videotapes his spouse or tails her to the store proves that their marriage is already broken. It is this lack of trust, not certainty, that is the death knell to any relationship. Think about it: if certainty hinders intimacy, a one-night stand between two strangers would comprise a healthier relationship than a couple celebrating their golden anniversary. We may never achieve 100 percent certainty about another person, but the more we approximate this goal, the

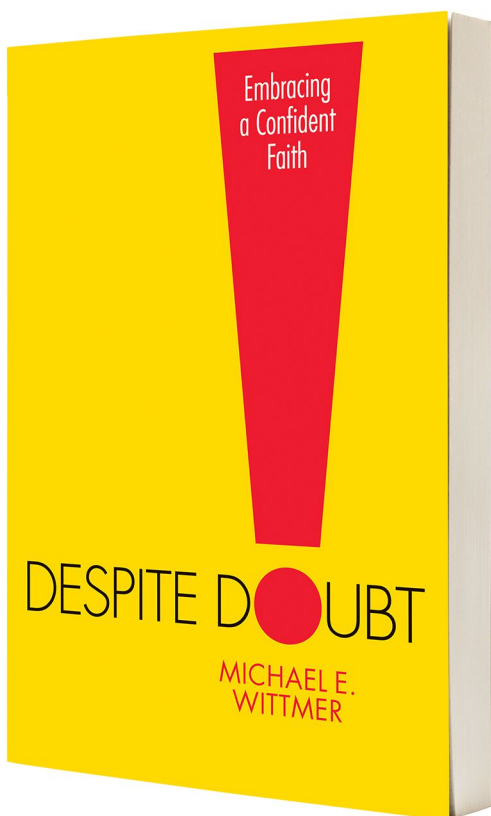
more we may trust and ultimately love him or her. We only become vulnerable with those we trust will not let us down.

I will say more about this in the next chapter, but before moving on, let's recap the point of this one. While it's popular today, both in the culture and in the church, to say that doubt is necessary for faith, a moment's reflection and several passages of Scripture prove this isn't the case. Doubt is not the fuel of faith. What does faith need to flourish? Turn the page to find out.

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