

THINK

REFERENCE

COLLECTION

theology

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theology

THINK FOR
YOURSELF ABOUT
WHAT YOU BELIEVE

Written by General Editor Mark Tabb



TH1NK

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Colorado Springs, Colorado 80935

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To David Dockery,
who introduced me to the wonders of theology and the
joy of thinking for myself about what I believe

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About the TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION

The TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION isn't an ordinary set of reference books. Like all of the books in the TH1NK line, we wrote these books for students. That doesn't mean we inserted some hip language into an otherwise dry, boring book to try to make it sound with it and cool, dude. Instead, we built these books on a couple of assumptions about you.

First, we knew you want honest representations of various points of view. Although all the books in the REFERENCE COLLECTION are written from an evangelical Christian position, we didn't dismiss all other viewpoints. Instead, we wrote these books in such a way that those holding different world-views and theological perspectives would be able to read these books and say, *Yes, this gives a good outline of what I and others believe.* To assure theological balance, all of the books in this collection have been reviewed by a panel of scholars from various theological perspectives and academic fields (see page 283 for a list of those scholars).

We also believed you are able to draw your own conclusions. Whether the question regards what Buddhists believe or whether Christians can lose their salvation, we didn't connect all the dots for you. Each book presents several perspectives. You will have to take the next step on your own and figure out what you believe and why you believe it. Our goal is to do more than answer questions. The TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION

About the TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION

is designed to make you think through your own beliefs and convictions, as well as those of others.

Finally, we assumed you want something more than a place to turn for answers to your questions about Islam or Psalm 119 or the role of women in the church. That's why we designed these books to be read, not just used for research. You can read them from cover to cover. Along the way, you will find that these books not only dispense information but also entertain you and challenge you and the way you see your world.

Mark Tabb
General Editor

Introduction

*Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology,
that will not mean that you have no ideas about God.
It will mean you have a lot of wrong ones.*

C. S. LEWIS

What you believe matters. It may well be the only thing that matters. Your beliefs shape your every decision, from what you had for breakfast this morning to your career path to whether or not you choose to get married and have children. Every choice you make is largely determined by the ideas rolling around in your head. All those facts you know to be true, along with everything you think might be true and all that stuff you hope isn't true, have conspired together to make you who you are. Ideas are the single most powerful force in the world, and along the way, you've put together an odd assortment of them that have shaped you. As you continue to add to that collection, your life will evolve. You determine your future today by the beliefs you decide to hold on to, as well as those you choose to reject as false.

This is especially true of your theology — that is, your beliefs about God. The word *theology* means the study or science of God, just as *biology* is the study of life, and *sociology* is the study of social institutions and relationships. Grouping these together may sound strange to postmodern ears, but that hasn't always been the case. In the Middle Ages, theology was known as “The Queen of the Sciences,” for it was the unifying principle that

Introduction

drove the study of every other area of life. We usually think of science and theology as fighting against one another, but the scientific revolution was born out of a Christian worldview. Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Louis Pasteur, and many other early heroes of science all professed faith in Christ. They believed a reasonable God created the universe. That, in their minds, made scientific discovery possible. Their beliefs about God both drove them to the sciences and worked as the filter through which they interpreted their research.

In the same way, your theology shapes everything else you believe, even if your theology leaves no room for God. That's why cosmonaut Gherman Titov, the second man to orbit the earth, looked out the window of his *Vostok II* spacecraft as he hurtled through space and said, "I am high in the sky, and still I do not see the face of God."¹ Yet King David, staring up at a night sky three thousand years earlier, said, "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1, NIV). How could both men, looking at the same sky, albeit one with a better view than the other, reach such different conclusions? Titov believed God wasn't there, while David knew he was.

Because your theology influences every other part of your life, you not only need to know what you believe about God, but you also need to think through those beliefs. Few people ever do that. Most of us walk through life collecting beliefs like my youngest daughter chooses socks each morning. She reaches into a drawer and grabs whatever her hand finds first. The colors don't matter. Wearing a green and red Christmas sock along with an orange and black jack-o'-lantern Halloween sock in the middle of April doesn't bother her at all. If it will slip between her foot and her Chuck Taylors, she will wear it. That's how most people put on their ideas about God. They

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grab an idea from a verse they read in the Bible in the morning, along with something they heard on *Oprah* in the afternoon, and combine them with a thought a friend said in an IM conversation. But they rarely, if ever, stand back and look at how all their ideas go together, or how those ideas line up with what God says about himself.

That's not the worst of it. Many people, maybe even most people, never look ahead to see where their odd collection of beliefs and ideas will take them. They never consider the long-term consequences or the logical outcome of what they believe to be true. This isn't a new phenomenon. One hundred years ago G. K. Chesterton wrote:

At any innocent tea-table we may easily hear a man say, "Life is not worth living." We regard it as we regard the statement that it is a fine day; nobody thinks that it can possibly have any serious effect on the man or on the world. And yet if that utterance were really believed, the world would stand on its head. Murderers would be given medals for saving men from life; firemen would be denounced for keeping men from death; poisons would be used as medicines; doctors would be called in when people were well; the Royal Humane Society would be rooted out like a horde of assassins. Yet we never speculate as to whether the conversational pessimist will strengthen or disorganize society; for we are convinced that theories do not matter.²

But theories do matter, because your beliefs matter. That's where this book comes in. It's designed to make you think seriously about your own theology. We want you to examine what

Introduction

you say you believe when you claim to be a Christian, why you believe it, and how those beliefs will express themselves in your life when you consistently live them. You won't find easy answers couched in religious clichés in these pages. Easy answers don't fare too well when you sit down in a classroom and everything you ever believed is called into question. Reciting clichés in the face of credible arguments from other worldviews makes as much sense as saying alligators are ornery because they have so many teeth and no toothbrush. You need something more if your faith is to survive as it brushes up against the real world. Nor will you grow up in your faith the way God desires if we tell you what you should think. Spiritual maturity comes as you learn to think biblically. That is the ultimate goal of this book. We want to help you be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ. Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. (Ephesians 4:13-15)

Black and White and Shades of Gray

We live in a pluralistic culture where tolerance is the supreme virtue, but the Bible doesn't share that sensitivity. It makes bold statements couched in absolute terms that leave no room for competing ideas. Deuteronomy 4:39 says, "The LORD is God both in heaven and on earth, and there is no other god!" Jesus echoed Deuteronomy when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). These statements must be true or false. Either

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the God of the Bible is the one true God and Jesus is the only Way to this God, or both are liars. They cannot be true for me and not for you, no matter how deeply we may wish otherwise. The Lord refuses to play that game. You don't have to believe these statements are true, but according to the Bible, the consequences of refusing to believe last forever.

However, not everything in the Bible and Christian theology is as cut-and-dried as Deuteronomy 4:39. The Bible boldly declares that Jesus died, rose again bodily, and ascended into heaven. It also says he will return to earth some day to take control of God's kingdom once and for all. Yet in the Bible, a lot of the details of Jesus' second coming are hazy. Questions abound as to whether he will return to rule on earth for a thousand years before the eternal age is ushered in, or if he will come after Christians have established his reign on earth for a thousand years, or whether all the references to Christ's thousand-year reign are to be taken metaphorically. Even those who agree on the first scenario disagree as to the details of how and when Christ's reign will come, and how his return relates to a time of trouble called the Great Tribulation.

In the same way, Christians don't always see eye to eye on theological issues such as baptism, the role of women in the church, speaking in tongues, the age of the earth, and whether it's possible to lose your salvation, just to name a few. Christianity may be a religion of the Book, but not everyone agrees on which translation of the Bible should be used. There's even disagreement over whether a Christ follower should dance, play cards, or have a glass of wine with dinner. While these questions don't determine whether a person will spend eternity in heaven or in hell, disagreements over them

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have caused more than one person to wonder why Christians can't get along.

The fact that everything in the Bible isn't crystal clear surprises most newcomers to the faith. They wonder why God would leave anything in his Word open to interpretation by the reader. In response, many people run to one of two extremes. The first is the all-gray group. In this group's view, nothing in the Bible is set in stone. Every idea is fluid. God. Jesus. The Holy Spirit. Who they are and what they do all come down to preferences, not absolutes. Theology is whatever you decide to make it. For the all-gray group, there are no wrong answers.

The second extreme is the there's-no-such-thing-as-gray group. People in this group want to uphold truth and the Bible and absolute standards of morality. Unfortunately, in their zeal to combat the fuzziness of the all-gray group, they make everything black-and-white. Pick an issue, and they have *the* answer. From the music in a worship service to the clothes you wear, the Bible has one, definitive answer. For the there's-no-such-thing-as-gray group, there's no room for compromise, because compromise means falling onto a slippery slope toward relativism.

Further compounding our difficulty is the fact that some of the theological issues people think of as black-and-white aren't so clear in the Bible, and some of the grays appear more distinctive when we actually read what God has to say about them. That's why, for the purposes of this book, the essentials of Christianity are those teachings of the Bible that have generally been agreed upon by followers of Jesus around the world for the past two thousand years. These are the central truths of our faith that believers have given their lives to uphold, the key teachings of both the Old and New Testaments that define

Introduction

what it means to be a Christian. The essentials include the belief that God has spoken with absolute truth, the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Jesus, and his bodily resurrection from the dead. Essentials also include the deity of the Holy Spirit, salvation through faith in Christ alone, and the need for Christian community called the church.

We will also explore the gray areas of Christianity, those issues that have divided believers over the past two thousand years. While some may seem as black-and-white as the print on this page to you, another person reading this book who comes from a different background sees them as anything but. His ideas seem as black-and-white to him as yours do to you. Believe it or not, the theological gray areas play a very important role in God's overall plan for your life. Jesus said the key distinctive of his followers would be the love we have for one another (see John 13:35). Anyone can love those who are just like him, but it's hard for people to get along with others whose ideas clash with theirs, much less love them. These gray areas allow us to put into practice Paul's words to the church in Rome:

Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently. (Romans 14:1, MSG)

Diversity within the Christian family also fits the pattern we see in the rest of God's creation. God loves variety. Why else would he make somewhere between two hundred and

Introduction

four hundred breeds of dog?³ Only God could dream up a way to have ten-pound miniature dachshunds and 130-pound mastiffs come out of the same genetic stock. It shouldn't surprise us then to find such variety within the Christian faith. If God had wanted every believer to be a hymn-singing, organ-playing, loud-sermon-preaching Baptist, he would have made sure every church fit that profile. Since it's hard to find two Baptists who are exactly alike, much less fit Presbyterians, Catholics, and Pentecostals into a single box, we must conclude that God finds pleasure in the diversity within his family. This isn't meant to imply that every group that calls itself Christian is actually part of God's family. Many cults, such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny the essentials of the faith, try to portray themselves as followers of Jesus. Their claims only underscore the importance of understanding biblical theology.

Saying God finds pleasure in diversity also doesn't mean that the doctrinal differences between denominations don't matter or that questions concerning these differences don't have a right or wrong answer. Beliefs matter, because they will determine your approach to the entire Christian life. Not all of the answers believers have come up with to the questions over which Christians disagree are correct. When Jesus returns, the question of the relationship between his return and his thousand-year reign, as well as every other theological question, will be settled once and for all. But until then, differences of opinion over baptism or tongues or the role of women within the church shouldn't distract us from the work Jesus gave us to complete while we await his return. Nor should they cause us to turn our attention to fighting against one another while a lost world slips further and further away from God.

Introduction

That is the purpose of this book. We want to help ground you in the essentials while opening your eyes to the possibility that there's room in God's family for more than one approach to the nonessentials. That also explains why this book doesn't contain a definitive answer on the gray areas. We called this *Think for Yourself About What You Believe* for a reason. Even in those areas that are essential to the Christian faith, we want you to think about how your life should change if these ideas are true, as well as what you should do if they are not.

Your beliefs set the course of your life. Therefore, you need to look ahead and see where the essential truths of Christianity will ultimately take you. God's truth will not leave you unchanged. The ideas he wants to implant inside you through his Word will change the course of your life. You also need to ponder how your life should change if these truths turn out to be nothing but legends. Then, you need to step back and ask yourself which of these two paths you are already walking down. Does your life reflect the growing influence of God's eternal truths? Or do you live like God and his Word are nothing but noise, even as you say you believe in him?

We also want you to think through the gray areas of the faith. We present multiple views on the questions about which believers disagree. But we don't tell you which view is right and which is wrong. That is by design. We want you to examine the issues involved. Listen to what the Bible has to say. Then think. Your future depends on it.

1

God Has Spoken

ESSENTIALS

General Revelation: God has revealed himself through his works to show us that he is real.

Special Revelation: God has revealed himself through his Word, the Bible, so that we might know him personally.

QUESTIONS

Which Bible is the right Bible?

Can the Bible ever be wrong?

There is a God, and he has spoken. That is the basic starting point for the Christian faith. Everything we believe as followers of Jesus hangs on the truth that God exists and he has spoken. This statement is also the Christian response to what Jean-Paul Sartre called the basic philosophical question: Why is there something rather than nothing? There is something because God spoke. Genesis opens with the line, “In the beginning God . . .” His existence isn’t explained; he is simply assumed. Before there was anything else, God was there. Then God shattered the silence of nothingness and spoke

all of creation into existence. If God did not exist, nothing else would either. And if God had remained silent, the universe would never have sprung into existence.

God spoke every created thing into existence with one exception: you and me. The Bible says he shaped the first man and woman in his own image. The moment he finished, he started up a conversation with them. He gave them a few simple guidelines to lead them in their lives on this new world. Sadly, the first man and woman chose to ignore God, but that wasn't the end of his conversation with the human race. He kept on talking, and he continues to speak today. Because God *is*, he speaks to those he made like himself. As Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us, "Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son."

section

1

ESSENTIALS

General Revelation: God has revealed himself through his works to show us that he is real.

“God exists and he has spoken” is more than a religious statement. Christianity stands or falls on whether or not there really is a God and whether or not he truly has communicated with the human race in very specific ways. At this point, most books like this rattle off a list of proofs for God’s existence, yet the Bible itself never does this. God is the one constant throughout all sixty-six books, yet none of the books contains a systematic list of answers to all the skeptics’ questions. Even in Genesis, God’s existence isn’t explained in any way. That doesn’t mean we’re left to accept God on blind faith without any evidence whatsoever. From the beginning of time, God has demonstrated who he is through what he does. His fingerprints on his works make the case for God even before we open his special revelation of himself in the Bible.

Think about it this way: When Michael Crichton writes a story, who he is permeates every part of it. Within each novel he creates worlds where dinosaurs are cloned from drops of blood found in fossilized mosquitoes, or where free-floating nanoparticles take on human forms and wreak havoc on those who try to stop them. The worlds he creates reflect the unique person who is Michael Crichton, including the words he uses, the plots he spins—even the characters he invents to populate his worlds. After reading *The Andromeda Strain* and *The Lost World*, you don’t even need to see his name on the cover to know he wrote *State of Fear*. The first few pages give him away. In the same way, Dr. Seuss’s books share a distinctive style, yet they also sound nothing

like anything created by any other writer, unless of course that writer is trying to imitate Seuss. Growing up on a steady diet of *Hop on Pop* and *The Cat in the Hat*, you would never confuse Theodor Geisel with the author of *Jurassic Park*. Nor would you think Crichton wrote *Green Eggs and Ham*. The two men's styles are too different, and their books show it.

Books reflect their authors. They can't avoid it. God's works do the same thing. Theologians call this *general revelation*—that is, God's revealing of himself, his power and divinity, to all people at all times and places. Also called natural revelation, this is the way God speaks without words through creation, history, and human nature. Although general revelation doesn't communicate enough about God for a person to enter into a personal relationship with him, it does tell those who pay attention that he exists, that he is powerful, and that he is a God of order, artistry, and purpose. God's voice through his works leaves people without an excuse when they claim they knew nothing of him (see Romans 1:19-20).

Fingerprints on Creation

God speaking through creation or the natural world means that when we look up at the stars or gaze at a California hill covered with wildflowers, we see the fingerprints of God. The more we fix our eyes on the wonder of creation, the more we must conclude that these things could not make themselves. Both the intricate design of creation and the way the universe appears to be fine-tuned for life declare that this couldn't happen by chance. Consider the following: If the electromagnetic force in atoms were weakened by a mere 4 percent, then the sun would immediately explode (the diproton would have a bound state, which would increase the solar luminosity by a factor 10^{18}). If it

were stronger, there would be fewer stable atoms. If the protons were 0.2 percent heavier, they would decay into neutrons unable to hold on to electrons, so there would be no stable atoms around. If the proton-to-electron mass ratio were much smaller, there could be no stable stars, and if it were much larger, there could be no ordered structures such as crystals and DNA molecules.¹

God doesn't just speak through the order and design we find in creation, but also through the jaw-dropping beauty that surrounds us. From something as mundane as a group of bright red cardinals sitting in a leaf-bare bush on a snowy Midwestern day, to the spectacular views of nebulae in distant corners of the galaxy beamed to earth by the Hubble Space Telescope,² creation doesn't just tell us that a Creator exists, but that this Creator is an artist without peer. The feelings of awe that come over us as we watch the waves pound against the rocks at the beach or hold a newborn baby for the first time are in fact God speaking to us through his masterpiece. Psalm 19:1-4 puts it this way:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (NIV)

While the order and beauty of the universe appear to be rock-solid proofs of God's existence to believers, unbelievers find many ways to explain them away. Physicist Max Tegmark

writes extensively on the way our universe is fine-tuned for life, yet he doesn't see this fine-tuning as evidence of a Creator. Rather, he sees it as further proof of the existence of parallel universes where such fine-tuning does not exist and life is not possible. For him, the fact that we find ourselves in a universe teeming with life is no more of a miracle than checking into a hotel and being given a room with the same number as the year of your birth. Room 1985 exists because all the other rooms exist. In the same way, Tegmark believes an infinite number of universes exist where every possible combination of physical laws rule. Some have life while others cannot.³ Other scientists regard what we call beauty as nothing more than the end result of natural selection playing out over eons of time. Bright red cardinals sit in bushes on snowy days because red feathers made the males of the species more attractive to the females. That's why this trait became dominant in cardinals—no further reason. For those who see the hand of natural selection in the world rather than the fingerprints of God, beauty is purely in the eyes of the beholder. Believers may hear God's revelation of himself through nature, but clearly, not everyone is listening.

Fingerprints on History

If God speaks through his works, then we should be able to see his hand not only in the created universe, but also in the way the history of that universe plays out over time. This is the second method of general revelation. The Bible says God started history when he created the heavens and the earth and that he will bring it to a close when Jesus returns. In between, believers see the invisible hand of God guiding the ebb and flow of historical events to accomplish God's greater purposes. This doesn't mean that God finds pleasure in everything that

takes place on the world stage, but rather that God directs the larger picture of history to move the human race toward his ultimate goal.

For many believers, no event demonstrates the hand of God in history more than the survival of the Jewish people. The Jews trace their lineage to Abraham, whom God promised to make into a great people through whom the entire world would be blessed. When God first made this promise, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were old and childless. Yet they believed God, and he made good on his promise. Throughout history numerous groups have tried to exterminate the Jews, most recently Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Yet not only have the Jews survived—they've thrived. In 1948, they once again took possession of the land God promised Abraham nearly two thousand years before Christ. The fact that Abraham's descendants could survive as a distinct people for so long in spite of the horrendous travails they've endured is evidence that something more than the blind hand of history is at play here. God must be involved, as he makes sure the people he chose so long ago continue to bear witness to who he is. The survival of the Jews is but one historical reality that Christians point to as evidence of God's hand in history.

However, before we leap to too many conclusions, we need to keep in mind that interpreting history is a subjective exercise. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the German people were told "Providence" had selected them to occupy the supreme place in the history of the universe.⁴ Obviously, history showed it had something else in mind entirely. In the same way, the arguments that are used to prove that God has preserved the Jewish race throughout history could also be used to prove that Fidel Castro rules Cuba by divine command and

that the Mormons' trek through the desert in the mid-1800s makes them God's New World equivalent of the Israelites. Most evangelical believers would never make those leaps. That's why history falls under the umbrella of *general* revelation. Although God may well speak through history, his message isn't exactly crystal clear.

Fingerprints on the Soul

People crave purpose.⁵ They want their lives to have meaning. Deep down inside our souls, we long to find the reason for our existence. This quest for meaning permeates every form of human expression, from art to music to literature. Yet if God doesn't exist, intrinsic meaning is an illusion. If everything, including human beings, is nothing more than the end result of time plus chance, then the physical universe is basically an accident. Some master plan doesn't rule the flow of events through time. Life just *is*. Without a God with a divine plan for each life, human beings simply live and die. There is no greater purpose. There is no eternal reason for your life. Your life is whatever you make it, and once it's over, it's over.

Yet human beings are repulsed by the idea of life without meaning or ultimate worth. Such thoughts lead to depression or something far worse. French painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) tried to convey this sense of despair over the meaninglessness of life in his painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Prior to painting his masterpiece, he had deserted his family and tried to find the answers to life's ultimate questions by living with the “noble savages” of Tahiti. Yet in the end, he concluded that there are no answers. Life is nothing more than a cruel dance that ends in death. He put his conclusions on canvas. After he finished painting the picture,

he tried to commit suicide, although he failed.⁶ Gauguin's suicide attempt was not an act of madness, but the only sane act in a world devoid of meaning. If life has no point, what is the point in living?

Christian theology understands this craving within the human soul to be a sign of God's fingerprint on those he made in his image. In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon explored this quest for meaning and the impossibility of finding it apart from God. Human beings can't help but long for something more out of life than what can be experienced through the five senses, because, in the words of Solomon, "[God] has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

People not only crave meaning; they also have an intrinsic sense of right and wrong and a longing for justice. C. S. Lewis called this the "natural law," or rules of decent behavior.⁷ Even critics who say rules of right and wrong are matters of taste, not absolutes, must agree that no one can live without them. Put another way, if right and wrong are illusions, then there is no real moral difference between helping a little old lady across the street and shoving her in front of a bus. No one in his right mind would agree with that statement, and even if he tried, he wouldn't be able to live out its implications consistently. Any society based on such a convoluted sense of morality would disintegrate and soon cease to exist. Why? Christianity says the reason lies in the way God made human beings. He made us in his image, and something about that image keeps calling us back to him, no matter how hard we try to drown out the voice.

The truly fascinating aspect of the natural law is the fact that no one consistently keeps it. We may not shove little old ladies in front

of buses, but we violate basic moral standards we know everyone should keep. Lewis saw this as proof of the divine origin of the natural law. Everyone says, “Well, no one is perfect,” yet if this natural law was nothing more than a human creation, why would we set the bar so high that no one can attain it? Something—or Someone—else must be in play here, and that Someone is God. Not only has he written his law in a book called the Bible; he has also etched it on human hearts (see Romans 2:14-15). We know what we should do, even when we don’t do it.

As with the other expressions of general revelation, not everyone agrees with this conclusion. A naturalist—that is, one who believes the physical universe is all there is and all there ever will be—believes society’s agreed-upon rules of right and wrong evolved along with human beings as a way of ensuring our survival. The moral difference between helping a little old lady across the street and shoving her in front of a bus comes not by divine revelation, but by the imprint of social norms attained through thousands of years of evolution. Cultures that showed little respect for life did not survive, while those that respected life flourished. That explains why one is the norm and not the other. In the eyes of those who don’t believe in a God who gives moral absolutes, helping others rather than harming them is morally superior because it’s more expedient to the survival of the species—nothing more.

Thus, while general revelation points to an eternal God who created the universe and actively involves himself in it, nothing revealed in this way enforces belief in God. Those who prefer other explanations can construct them. But for those who are willing to see them, God’s fingerprints cover his works just as the personality of an author flows through his books. If God is, and if he has spoken, then the evidence surrounds us.

But this is only the beginning of the story. God's voice through creation, history, and the human heart only opens the door for us to listen to his specific message awaiting us in his written Word, the Bible.

Special Revelation: God has revealed himself through his Word, the Bible, so that we might know him personally.

General revelation tells us that God exists. However, if that were all we had to go on, we would never know who this God is. That's where God's special revelation comes in. Special revelation is "God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him."⁸ Through it God steps out from behind the curtain and tells us not only what he is like, but more importantly, how we can know him personally and intimately.

The Need for Special Revelation

Special revelation makes knowing God possible. The difference between God and human beings is so great that our finite minds cannot comprehend an infinite God unless he himself explains himself to us. In comparison to God, a person is like an amoeba sitting atop the Empire State Building. From the beginning of our existence, we've struggled to comprehend the nature of the physical universe that envelops us, yet the Bible says God measured out the vastness of space with his fingers (see Isaiah 40:12). Obviously, God doesn't have physical hands, but Isaiah uses this analogy to show how God is far greater than our minds can image. If we can't fully comprehend the universe, how much harder will it be for us to figure out the One who designed it?

The limitations of the human mind in relation to God are further complicated by the separation that now exists between God

and us, a separation caused by our sin. Romans 1:21 tells us sin has left our minds dark and confused. As a result, human wisdom will never lead anyone to God (see 1 Corinthians 1:21). In its natural state, the human mind cannot understand God's truths. They all sound like nothing but foolishness (see 1 Corinthians 2:14). Unless God spoke up, we would never find him on our own. We would be left groping in the dark, feeling our way toward God in a celestial game of hide-and-seek.

The Nature of Special Revelation

God is a personal God, and his revelation of himself reflects this. Through it he shows us exactly who he is and what he's like. When God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, he identified himself by name. "I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS," he said. "Just tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). Giving his name does more than identify this God in a pantheon of gods. His name, and his revelation of himself, show us who he is.

When he decided to reveal himself to people, God didn't just drop a load of facts about himself down from heaven like statistics on the back of a baseball card. His revelation does much more. The Bible tells us, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). As he interacts with human beings, we learn what this really means. He told Isaiah, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15-16, NIV). In reading these words, we not only learn more information about God, but we experience him as well. We feel the depths of his love and hear the intensity of his passion. As we do, we find our souls pulled toward the One who loves us with a love that goes beyond our ability to understand.

Although God's revelation is personal, it doesn't stop there. As he reveals himself, God reveals eternal truth. Jesus himself said to his Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17, NIV). Again, our starting point is that God exists, and he has spoken. As he speaks, he reveals both himself and the truth about the world around us. He doesn't just show us himself and leave us to figure out the rest on our own. God's revelation contains the truths upon which our quest for truth in every other field can rest. Given the nature of God, what else would we expect to find? As Hebrews 6:18 says, "It is impossible for God to lie."

Some have tried to downplay this aspect of God's revelation. Twentieth-century theologians such as Emil Brunner maintained that if revelation is regarded as the communication of propositional truths, then faith is nothing more than a mental assent to those truths. The heart is left out. But, according to Brunner, if revelation is regarded as the presentation of a person, then faith is an act of personal trust and commitment to a personal God.⁹

The concerns Brunner and others raise are valid. However, this doesn't have to be an either/or equation. God reveals both himself as a person and eternal truths about himself and his creation. Faith is based upon factual truths, but as we will see in section 5, believing means more than mental assent to information. Jesus' disciples understood the truth that he was indeed the Messiah. They responded to that truth by leaving everything behind to follow him. For them, God's revelation was both informational and personal. That combination proved life changing, both then and now.

Special Revelation and the Bible

Special revelation and the Bible are not synonymous. Revelation is the act by which God shows himself for who he is; the Bible is

the written record of this revelation. Not all special revelations are recorded in the Bible, and not everything in the Bible came about through special revelation. Since Jesus was the Son of God, everything he did or said was a special revelation of God his Father. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!” Jesus told his disciples in John 14:9. Yet only a small percentage of Jesus’ words and acts are recorded in the Bible. John put it this way: “And I suppose that if all the other things Jesus did were written down, the whole world could not contain the books” (John 21:25). Clearly, not every act of God’s special revelation of himself has been preserved.

Nor did everything recorded in the Bible come about through an act of special revelation. When Moses recorded how Pharaoh forced the Israelites to make bricks without supplying them with straw (Exodus 5), he was writing what he observed firsthand. God didn’t have to appear to him and show him these events in a miraculous way. As we will see in a moment, God moved Moses’ spirit to show him which of these events to include in the book of Exodus, but he didn’t have to reveal these events to him.

The Bible also records conversations between people that contain wrong ideas and falsehoods. For example, the book of Job records a long conversation between Job and his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Although the words of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are accurately recorded, the things they say are not correct. God himself rebuked Job’s comforters in the last chapter of the book, telling them, “I am angry with you and with your two friends, for you have not been right in what you said about me, as my servant Job was” (Job 42:7). These three guys’ words may be in the Bible, but they don’t reflect God revealing himself to the speakers in a special way.

Preserving God's Revelation: Inspiration

Special revelation is God's act of making himself known to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him. Without it, no one would ever come to know God personally. However, because God wanted to make himself known to the entire world, he moved certain people to record his revelation of himself in the Bible. This record includes not only special messages from the Lord (such as the prophets' messages that begin, "This is what the LORD Almighty says"), but also the story of how God worked in the lives of the people to make himself known to the world.

The way God worked in the lives of the Scripture writers to ensure their words were his words is called *inspiration*. This doesn't mean Peter and Paul and the others were inspired by their encounter with God in the same way an artist is inspired by a sunset to paint or a love-struck boy is inspired to write poetry for his beloved. In Christian theology, inspiration refers to the act of the Holy Spirit moving the hearts and minds of the human authors of the Bible so that their words were literally the Word of God.

While this may sound like the Spirit dictated the Bible, that's not what this means. God didn't just use the writers as human tape recorders. When he moved human authors to write his Word, he allowed their unique personalities and perspectives to shine through their writings. Paul's style (Romans–Philemon) is very different from John's (the gospel of John, 1–3 John, Revelation), while both sound nothing like Jeremiah or Malachi. The prayers and praises of the Psalms reflect different perspectives from a different time than the guttural cries for help in Lamentations. The way John described the apocalyptic

images of Revelation is very different from Daniel's approach in the book that bears his name. Inspiration, therefore, means that God worked through the totality of each writer: his experiences, his unique perspectives, and the historical situation in which he found himself in the writing of God's Word.

Two passages, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21, are most often referred to as explanations of both what inspiration is and how God did it. Second Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right." The Greek word translated "inspired," *θεοπνευστος*, combines the word *θεος*, God, with *πνεω*, to breathe. The term emphasizes the fact that the Bible truly does come from God—he breathed it out. In fact, no stronger Greek word could have been used to emphasize the divine nature of the Bible.¹⁰

However, *θεοπνευστος* does not tell us exactly how God moved the writers of the Bible to pen his Word. Second Peter 1:20-21 answers this question. It says, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophets themselves or because they wanted to prophesy. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets to speak from God." The word translated "moved," *φερόμενοι*, literally means to pick up and carry. The same term was used to describe carrying a pail of water. That is how the Holy Spirit of God moved those he used to write the Bible. He picked them up and carried them along, opening their minds and moving their spirits to write God's message. The Spirit revealed special messages direct from God and showed which historical events to include in his Word. Part of this carrying along included using the unique life setting into which God placed each writer, as well as their

personalities and the experiences they'd lived through before writing the Bible. Again, the Spirit's inspiration didn't come in a vacuum, nor did God simply drop his words down from heaven. The Spirit's carrying of each writer included the totality of the authors' lives (see Jeremiah 1:4-5).

The divine nature of the Scriptures is assumed throughout the Bible. From the Law, to the Prophets and Writings, to the New Testament itself, the Scriptures are referred to as the Word of God. In fact, God and his Word are presented as inseparable. How we treat one reflects our attitude toward the other. John explained, "But those who obey God's word really do love him. That is the way to know whether or not we live in him" (1 John 2:5).

Implications of Inspiration

Because the Scriptures come from God, every part is important, no matter how small. Jesus himself said, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18, NIV). The smallest Hebrew letter was *yod* (י), which looks like an apostrophe. The "least stroke of a pen" refers to the small marks that differentiate one letter from another, such as *dalet* (ד) from *resh* (ר).

According to Jesus, the small extension from the top line of a dalet in the midst of the Law will last longer than the heavens and earth. Why? Because God breathed out the Law. Therefore it is as permanent as he is. Isaiah echoed the permanence of God's Word when he declared, "The grass withers, and the flowers fade beneath the breath of the LORD. And so it is with people. The grass withers, and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8). Peter quoted

this passage from Isaiah in 1 Peter 1:23-25 with a twist. Peter asserted that the reason we know our new life in Christ will last forever is because it comes from the “eternal, living word of God.” This living Word produces life within us, as well as reveals the innermost thoughts and secrets inside our souls (see Hebrews 4:12).

Not only will the words of the Bible last because they come from God; they also cannot be altered or nullified by people. In John 10:35, Jesus said that the Scriptures cannot be broken. In Revelation 22:18-19, John pronounced a divine curse on anyone who tries to add to or take away from the words of the final book of the Bible.

That wasn't the first time God placed such importance on his Word. Throughout the Bible he held people responsible for whether or not they obeyed his Word. He did this because, according to the Bible, the Scriptures truly are the very words of God. Because the Scriptures come from God, they carry his authority. Obeying God means obeying his word as found in the Bible. Deuteronomy 5:32 puts it this way: “You must obey all the commands of the LORD your God, following his instructions in every detail.”

Skeptics pass off citing the Bible to show the truthfulness and authority of the Scriptures as circular reasoning. We will discuss this further in the section on inerrancy. However, for now suffice it to say that throughout the history of the church, Christians have generally agreed upon the divine nature, inspiration, and authority of the Bible. Without it, we would know nothing of Jesus Christ, who is the basis of Christianity in the first place.

section

1

QUESTIONS

Which Bible is the right Bible?

After hearing how vital the Bible is to the Christian life, many believers immediately ask, “Which one?” Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of English versions of the Bible has exploded. Does older mean better, or should all the old versions such as the King James and New International Versions be scrapped when a new Bible such as the New Living Translation or The Message comes along? The question isn’t just one of taste or style. The real issue is this: Is one Bible version more authoritative than another? Is there only one *right* Bible?

Bible Basics

When speaking of different versions of the Bible, we don’t refer to completely different Bibles with different books, characters, authors, and basic teachings.¹¹ Instead, we refer to different translations. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. In Islam, Muslims—regardless of their backgrounds—have historically been required to learn Arabic to read the Koran in its original language. By contrast, Christians make translating the Bible into the native tongue of believers a priority as a part of fulfilling Jesus’ command to make disciples of all nations. The Bible was first translated even before Jesus was born. Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek around 100 BC. Known as the Septuagint, this translation met the needs of a growing Jewish population who both spoke and read only Greek rather than Hebrew.

John Wycliffe compiled the first English translation of both the Old and New Testaments in 1380. William Tyndale translated the first modern English Bible—that is, the first

to be published after Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1436—in the sixteenth century. He published his English New Testament in 1526 and the entire Bible in 1534. In 1607, a team of scholars commissioned by King James I started work on a new translation authorized by the throne. Completed in 1611, the Authorized Version is better known as the King James Version. It is estimated that nine-tenths of the Authorized Version is taken from Tyndale’s translation.¹² The KJV was revised in 1613, 1629, and again in 1638. Finally, the language and spelling were modernized at Cambridge in 1762 and at Oxford in 1769. These final revisions are essentially the King James Bible we have today.¹³

The Authorized Version underwent revisions for the same reason new translations continue to come on the scene. Languages constantly change. As word meanings and phrases evolve and change, translations must be updated. If not, they soon cease to fulfill the purpose of translating the Bible, which is to allow modern readers to read the ancient texts without first spending a lifetime learning Hebrew and Greek. C. S. Lewis said, “The truth is that if we are to have translation at all we must have periodical re-translation. There is no such thing as translating a book into a language once for all, for a language is a changing thing. If your son is to have clothes it is no good buying him a suit once and for all: he will grow out of it and have to be re-clothed.”¹⁴

Principles of Translation

Scholars use two approaches when translating the Bible as they attempt to balance faithfulness to the original text with readability in the translation. The first approach, formal equivalence, works to render a word-for-word, literal

translation. The second, dynamic equivalence, focuses on giving a thought-for-thought rendering of the text. The New American Standard, King James Version, and New King James are the most literal of the popular translations, while the New Living Translation is the best example of dynamic equivalence. The New International Version attempts to strike a balance between formal and dynamic equivalence.

The Message and The Living Bible are not translations in the classic sense, but paraphrases of the Bible—that is, they restate the message of the Scriptures in modern vernacular. While other translations employ a team of scholars, paraphrases are primarily the work of one person, although a team of scholars oversees the projects.

So which approach is best, formal or dynamic equivalence? The question comes down to readability versus accuracy. All translations, even the most literal, must at times translate thought for thought. For example, Acts 20:7 contains the phrase, “τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων,” which literally reads, “the one of the Sabbaths.” However, in this context, the word “Sabbaths” means “week.” The “one” means the first day, or, the first day of the week. A strict reliance on literal accuracy would leave the translation unintelligible.

In the same way, emphasizing readability can, at times, give a technically accurate translation while losing some of the details within the text. For example, in Romans 3:25, Paul calls Jesus the ἱλαστήριον that God gave for our sins. The Greek term literally means “mercy seat,” which connects Jesus to the Old Testament Day of Atonement and the place where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled within the Holy of Holies. That doesn’t mean “mercy seat” is the best way to translate the term. No major translation uses this choice of words. While a literal

translation of the term does not convey the full weight of Paul's message, losing the word-for-word translation causes English-speaking readers to miss the parallels Paul wanted to convey.

Translations and Interpretation

Every translation carries an element of commentary on the text. The English words translators choose reflect a degree of their own theological outlook, no matter how hard they may try to do otherwise. Romans 3:25 above is the best example of this. The Greek term ἱλαστήριον conveys the idea of making atonement and forgiving sin. However, a question remains as to whether the emphasis needs to be placed on the one who has been sinned against, or the act that needs to be forgiven. The former places the emphasis on God, who is angry because of our sin and whose wrath must be satisfied. The latter puts the emphasis on humans and the things we've done that broke God's Law.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the debate came down to which of two words should be used to translate this term, propitiation or expiation. Propitiation means to regain the good will or mercy of an offended party, while expiation means to extinguish the guilt incurred by sin. The King James Version, along with the American Standard Version of 1901 and the New American Standard Bible, used propitiation. The Revised Standard Version (1946, 1952) sparked a great deal of controversy when it used expiation instead.

Twenty-first-century readers fail to grasp the reason for the debate, because neither term means anything to the majority of believers, especially those under forty. However, the way modern translations render the term still reveals the translators' understanding of which idea should be the focal point of the verse: God's anger or human guilt. The New Living Translation

emphasizes the former by translating Romans 3:25 as, “For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us.” The NIV focuses on the latter: “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,” although a footnote reads, “Or as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin.”

The point is simply this: Every translation reflects the biases of the translators, no matter how subtle those biases may be. That’s why the major translations use a large number of scholars from across the theological spectrum to make the resulting version as nonsectarian as possible.

The Best Translation

All of this brings us back to the question posed at the beginning: Which translation is the best translation? The answer isn’t easy to give. Every translation has both strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, short of spending the next twenty years of your life working to become proficient at both Greek and Hebrew, the best approach is to read and compare multiple translations. By comparing different versions, we are able to pick up on the different shades of meaning and nuances of the original language. Changing translations from time to time also keeps God’s Word fresh. We can become so accustomed to the sound and rhythm of our favorite translation that we fail to hear God speak through it. Using a different translation can wake us up and allow us to hear the Bible again.

Does this mean all translations are equally good? Not at all. But, by comparing translations, you can discern the intent of the original authors of the Bible. When one version uses radically different words that give a completely different meaning from all the rest, a red flag should come up telling you something is awry.

Can the Bible ever be wrong?

Christians believe the Bible is God's Word. However, parts of the Bible are very difficult to understand and believe, especially in light of modern scientific advances. The first chapter of the Bible says God created plants before he created the sun, moon, and stars. How is that possible? Other passages appear to contradict one another. Second Samuel 24:1 says God was angry with Israel and incited King David to sin by taking a census. However, 1 Chronicles 21:1 says Satan was responsible for doing this. Second Samuel 24:1 also appears to contradict James 1:13, which says God never tempts anyone to do evil. Does this mean the writer of 2 Samuel was mistaken? Or is James wrong? Or is it possible that both are correct?

The Bible also contains data that doesn't add up using basic scientific methods. For example, 2 Chronicles 4:1-2 describes a large round tank called "the Sea" that sat near the entrance of the temple. The priests washed in this tank before performing their sacred duties. The writer of Chronicles said the Sea was ten cubits wide and thirty cubits in circumference. However, you learned in math class that you find the circumference of a circle by multiplying π by the diameter, which would make the Sea 31.4 cubits around rather than 30. Does this mean the Bible made a mistake and is therefore in error?

The real question is this: Can the Bible ever be wrong?

Inerrancy and Infallibility

The question of whether or not the Bible contains mistakes or wrong information is called the question of *inerrancy*. Historically, evangelical Christians have maintained that the Bible is free of error and is therefore completely trustworthy.

The statement of faith for The Navigators, the parent company of THINK, states the doctrine like this: “We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inspired by God and inerrant in the original writings, and that they are of supreme and final authority in faith and life.”

Closely related to the idea of inerrancy is that of infallibility. This means that the Bible never makes false or misleading statements. Infallibility means God’s Word is always correct when it speaks. Both inerrancy and infallibility grow out of the doctrine of the Bible’s divine nature and inspiration. If the Bible is God’s Word, the logical conclusion is that he will always tell us the truth, and his Word will be error free.

Inerrancy applies only to the original writings. Only the Scriptures as originally written by Moses, Paul, and the other authors of the Bible are free of error. Subsequent copies and translations share this to the degree that they match the originals. Critics claim this dances around the issue, because the originals no longer exist. However, through textual criticism—that is, comparing the large number of ancient copies of the Bible with one another—scholars are able to tell with a fair degree of certainty where a copyist error may have crept into the biblical text.

Stating the doctrine in this way also protects against a blanket endorsement of all translations, because errors can creep into the publication process. A 1631 edition of the Authorized Version was known as the “Wicked Bible” because a typesetter forgot to put a “not” in the seventh commandment. Imagine the surprise that greeted everyone who read, “Thou shalt commit adultery.”

Most formal declarations on biblical inerrancy also include the phrase “when translated correctly.” Millard Erickson built

his definition of the term around this idea by stating, “The Bible, *when correctly interpreted* in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms.”¹⁵ Why this caveat? While the Bible may be true in all it affirms, the conclusions believers draw from it may not be correct, even when those conclusions enjoy universal popularity. For example, prior to the Copernican revolution in science, people thought the Bible taught that the earth was the center of the universe. The Bible wasn’t in error; what people read into it was.

Views of Inerrancy

Those who believe the Bible is error free differ on the scope of inerrancy. *Absolute inerrantists* maintain that the Bible is completely true in everything it says, even when it gives historical and scientific details. They believe the Bible’s writers intended to give us not only information about God and how to know him, but also detailed scientific and historical information.

Full inerrantists also hold that the Bible is completely true, even in matters of science and history. However, they would say that the Bible records scientific and historical information as they appear to the observer, rather than as a scientist or a historian would write about them.

Limited inerrantists also believe the Bible is free from error, but only in reference to matters directly related to faith and salvation, not science and history.

Finally, there are those who say that the Bible is *inerrant in purpose*, and that purpose is to bring people into a relationship with Christ, not to communicate truth.¹⁶

The best way to understand the difference is to see each view in action. Absolute inerrantists read the first chapter of Genesis and say that God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence in six literal twenty-four-hour days. Full inerrantists say God created the universe in six days; however, the “days” don’t necessarily mean twenty-four-hour periods, but rather six distinct ages of creative activity by God. These ages could have been as short as a day or as long as thousands upon thousands of years. Limited inerrantists believe the question of the length of the days or how God created everything is irrelevant. The important truth is the fact that God made everything, whether that was in six days, in six ages, or over an incredibly long period of time through evolutionary processes. The last group, those who hold to inerrancy of purpose, would say that the important truth of Genesis 1 is simply that there is a God who speaks and can be known. To them, the Bible was never meant to communicate objective truths about the origins of the universe.

Inerrancy and Questionable Passages

The question of inerrancy stops being just another theological debate the moment you open your Bible and read something that is hard to believe or appears to contradict itself. At that moment you have to ask yourself, *Can I trust what I am reading?* For example, what do you do with a passage like Joshua 10:13, which says, “So the sun and moon stood still until the Israelites had defeated their enemies. Is this event not recorded in *The Book of Jashar*? The sun stopped in the middle of the sky, and it did not set as on a normal day”?

For the limited inerrantist or those who limit inerrancy to the Bible’s overall purpose, this passage doesn’t pose a problem.

They would say the sun didn't stand still, since the earth would have to stop spinning on its axis to make this happen. To them, Joshua records a myth or legend that was meant to convey a lesson on faith.

Those holding a stronger view of inerrancy approach difficult passages with the understanding that just because a passage is hard to understand doesn't mean it's false or figurative. From beginning to end, the Bible records miraculous events, all of which defy what we consider normal. In fact, the central truth upon which Christianity rests is hard to understand on a strictly human level. How could God become flesh, be born of a virgin, live a sinless life, die on a cross, and rise bodily from the dead? Yet 1 Corinthians 15:17-19 declares that if these events did not take place, Christianity is a sham. Paul wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world."

How then would they deal with a verse like Joshua 10:13? Most would admit that they don't know how God kept the sun from setting, but they believe that he did it just as the Bible says. Full inerrantists would also add that the sun stood still from the perspective of the observer on the battlefield, so the earth did not have to stop spinning to make this miracle happen.

Apparent discrepancies in the Bible are handled in the same way. For example, the relation of the circumference to the diameter of the large tank at the entrance to the temple mentioned at the beginning of this chapter isn't an example of the Bible being wrong. Instead, the author of Chronicles describes this

as an observer. He isn't giving technical data. Those holding to a strong view of inerrancy believe that explanations exist for these difficult passages, even if they do not yet know what they may be.

Does the Question Matter?

During the 1970s and 1980s, inerrancy was *the* hot-button issue among evangelicals. Harold Lindsell in his book *The Battle for the Bible* called it the single most important question facing Christianity. He and other leaders of the day saw inerrancy as the dividing line between true believers and those who had stepped onto the slippery slope toward unbelief. While he stopped short of saying that those who did not believe in inerrancy were not truly Christians, the implication was that those who did not hold this view were in danger of abandoning the faith. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy declared, "We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith."

Both the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest Protestant denomination in America) and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod went through protracted internal battles over inerrancy. In both cases, those holding to a strict view of inerrancy carried the day. Both denominations marked the outcomes of these disputes as major victories for the integrity of God's Word and the Lord's work on earth.

Today, however, leaders of the Emerging Church movement and other younger evangelicals shy away from using the term. They do so for two reasons. First, to them the word *inerrancy* is a negative term, describing something the Bible is not, rather than something it is. Further, they point out that the Bible

never uses the term to describe itself. When asked their view of the Word of God, they prefer to use vocabulary the biblical writers used—terms such as “living, active, profitable for teaching, and truth.”¹⁷

The second reason lies in the roots of the debate over inerrancy and the emergence of the term in the evangelical theological vocabulary. Much of the writings on and in defense of inerrancy grew out of response to the Enlightenment questions on epistemology—that is, the question of how we can know what we know. Enlightenment thinkers sought to find the base or foundation for all knowledge, which is known as foundationalism. Prior to this time, the church and the Bible were viewed as the starting point for all knowledge, at least in the Western world during the Middle Ages. Enlightenment thought pushed God and the Bible to the side and sought a universal ground for knowledge that did not depend on special revelation.¹⁸

Theologians responded by seeking a ground of sure knowledge for Christianity. Two schools of thought emerged, liberals and conservatives. Generally speaking, liberals looked for this foundation apart from the Bible and pointed to religious experience as the answer. Conservatives said the Bible, the Word of God, is the one sure foundation for all knowledge, and within this Word are authoritative, propositional truths that can be clearly stated in a timeless way.¹⁹

The problem with both approaches, according to Stanley Grenz and John Franke, is that in their quest to find the foundational truth upon which all knowledge can be based, both liberal and conservative theologians silenced the Bible. The Scriptures themselves and the stories that fill them ceased to be primary. Instead, these theologians read the Bible only to discover the timeless, propositional truths beneath the text. As a

result, the story of David and Goliath mattered far less than the lessons it teaches about God's ability to defeat any foe. Instead of someone reading the Bible for himself, a person needed an expert to come along and tell him what the text is really about. And believing the experts' explanation of these timeless truths became equated with believing the inerrant Bible. As Grenz and Franke put it, "Despite the well-meaning, lofty intentions of conservative thinkers to honor the Bible as Scripture, their approach in effect contributed to the silencing of the text in the church."²⁰

The Emerging Church removes itself from the entire debate over inerrancy and its foundationalist roots by asserting that Christianity doesn't need a rational defense. In his book *The Younger Evangelicals*, Robert Webber states, "Radical Orthodoxy begins with the assumption that Christianity is truth. Because it is true, everything in the world—the world itself, its history, its religions, its social sciences, its ethics, its behaviors—should be interpreted and understood through the Christian faith."²¹ They feel no need to prove the Bible is free of errors. Postmodern theologians simply begin with the Bible and let it determine what is real. Rather than search for a way to explain away the hard-to-understand and mysterious, this school of thought declares we should simply let God's story speak. As God speaks, lives will be changed.

Does this approach dodge the question that started this chapter? That's for you to decide.