

"Not only is this book full of provocative answers that college students need to hear, it's full of the tough, real-life questions that college students are looking to ask and we are many times afraid to hear. I value Professor Theophilus's biblical wisdom he shares with students, but more importantly I appreciate the relationships he has built with college students and his willingness to truly listen to them. I wish I had a book and professor like this when I was in college."

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president, Prison Fellowship

"Discover over and over God's sensible perspectives as you eavesdrop on Theophilus dialoguing with those who question or challenge him on issues of behavior and belief. Learn not only biblically sound, logically consistent content but also the techniques of firm, loving engagement, and become a more skillful ambassador in the process."

—DAVID C. NESS
PhD, university faculty ministry consultant

"The very best advice column available for young Christians is that written by the ever wise and always witty Professor Theophilus. Reading the good professor's latest book, *Ask Me Anything 2*, one wonders if the Lord hasn't suddenly made the wisdom of Solomon available to us again while insisting that his wisdom be delivered with just a dab of flair and charm. Buy this book for all the young Christians you know and they'll not only gain invaluable perspective, insights, and solutions to many of the problems already confronting them, they'll also learn how to think about problems in general as faithful believing Christians should."

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executive officer, The Catholic Educator's Resource Center

"Professor Theophilus is great. He is wise, penetrating, and always right on target. This book offers spiritual guidance that college students will take in like pizza. Even this old retired professor couldn't put it down and learned a lot."

—PHILLIP E. JOHNSON
*professor of law emeritus, University of California, Berkeley;
author of Darwin On Trial*

"It is one thing to read about natural law in *What We Can't Not Know*, but it is quite another to have J. Budziszewski (aka Professor Theophilus) show you how to apply it in real-life situations. Students and adults will learn so much about how to apply reason and biblical truth to their everyday world in *Ask Me Anything 2*. It's a great resource you need to read."

—KERBY ANDERSON

national director for, Probe Ministries; host, Point of View radio talk show

"J. Budziszewski is one of the most gifted thinkers and writers in the Christian world today, a winsome example of how one ought to answer difficult questions about the faith with clarity, charity, and real insight. As the redoubtable, though accessible, Professor Theophilus, Budziszewski offers to his questioners the deep resources of the Christian faith in such a way that his answers illuminate dark patches of ignorance the present age presents as wisdom. Every Christian attending or planning to go to college (or, dare I say, teaching college!) should master the style and substance of both this book and its predecessor."

—FRANCIS J. BECKWITH

associate professor of philosophy and church-state studies, Baylor University

ASK ME ANYTHING

more provocative answers for college students

j. budziszewski
(aka professor theophilus)

2



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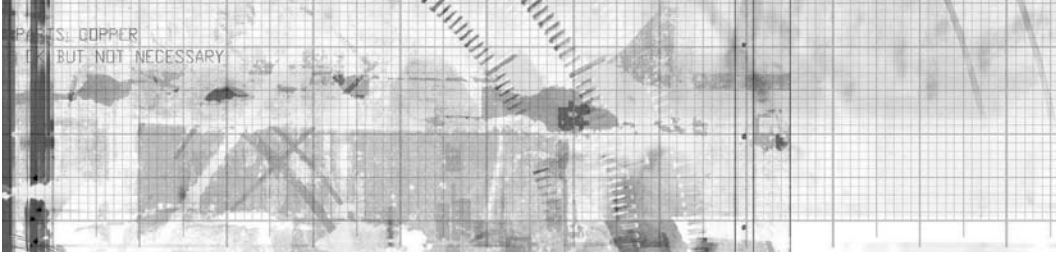
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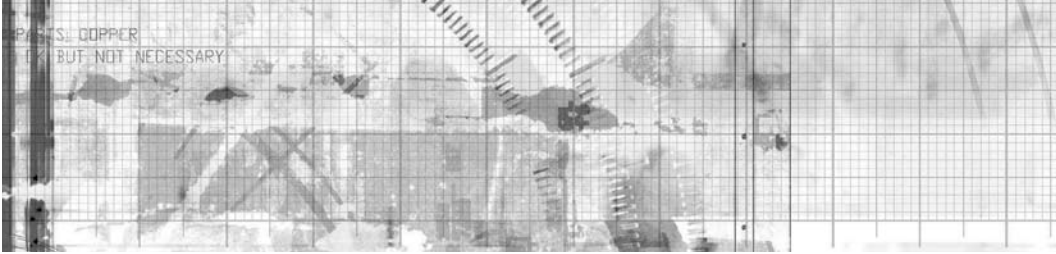
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Thanks are due chiefly to Sandra, crown of my home and light of my eyes.

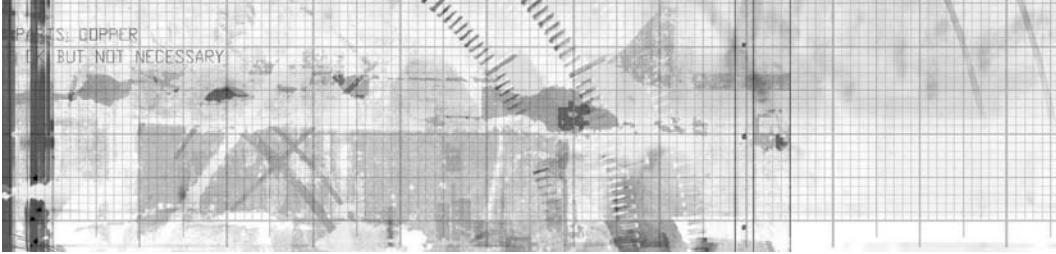
Acknowledgment is also due to Alexandra, for patient answers to many odd questions about pop culture and dialect;

To Arlen Nydam and Ben Hicks, for confirming the inscription at the library;

To everyone who wrote to Theophilus;

To everyone who told me that he had made a difference in their lives;

And to all my students, known and unknown. May the Father of Lights illuminate the paths of their studies.



INTRODUCTION

IN MY FORMER BOOK, THEOPHILUS . . .

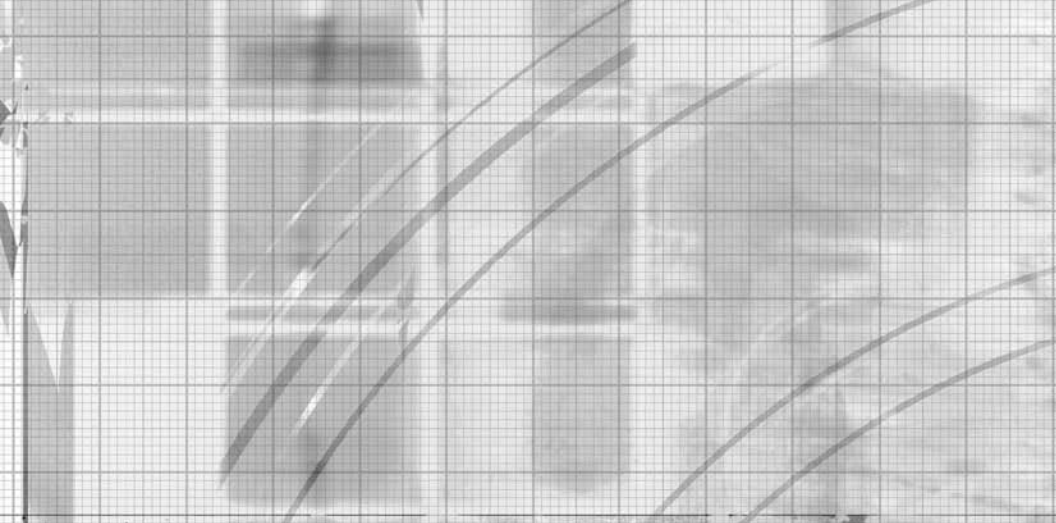
Acts 1:1

I hope you enjoy this second volume of the conversational adventures of Professor M. E. Theophilus, holder of the PMS Chair¹ in the School of Antinomianism at Post Everything University. In case you were wondering, he is not the same as the biblical Theophilus to whom St. Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, although he was named after him. That also explains his initials.²

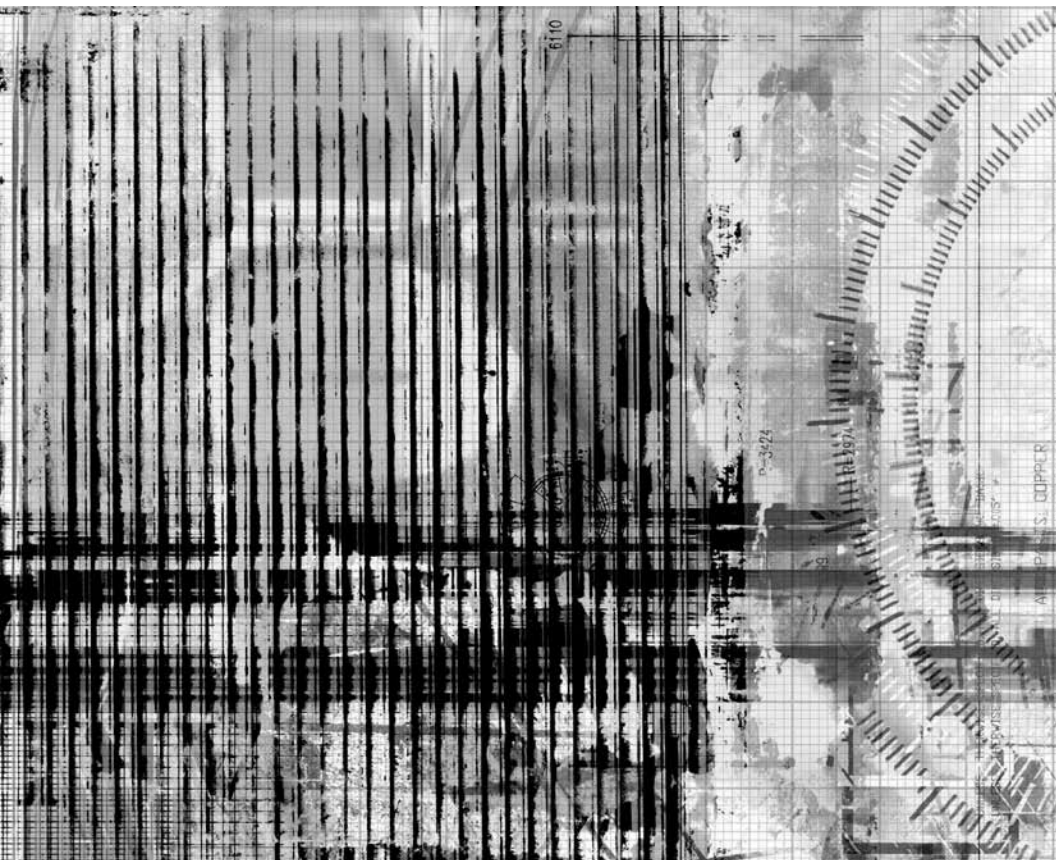
Ask Me Anything 2 isn't just more of the same. It includes not just new material, but new kinds of material. You'll see that reflected in the letters, too. I explain some of the differences in the introductions to each of the four sections.

Sometimes people wonder what sort of place Post Everything University is. Frankly, it's not much different than most universities these days. At the east end of the main quad is the great iron gate of the Dis Memorial Library, each side of its rusty arch declaring half of the school's Latin motto—on one side, for those going in, *Non Cognoscetis Veritatem*, "you shall not know the truth," and on the other, for those coming out, *Et Dubitatio Liberabit Vos*, "and doubt shall set you free." That pretty well sums up the school's creed. Not many people know that when the school was founded, the motto on the gate was different: *Cognoscetis Veritatem, Et Veritas Liberabit Vos*, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." These words were said by Christ to His disciples. They still sum up Theophilus' creed. Mine too.

Ever since I began writing about him, people keep introducing me as "Professor Theophilus." Allow me to take this opportunity to declare that we are not the same person; I am merely his friend and chronicler. Even my editors confuse us. I'll bet the cover of this book will say "aka Professor Theophilus" underneath my name. A bio line in one of my online columns about Theophilus³ misleadingly declared that "J. Budziszewski drinks his coffee black, strong and bitter." No, that's how he drinks it. I, of course, use cream. I hope this settles the controversy.



LEARNING TO THINK STUFF





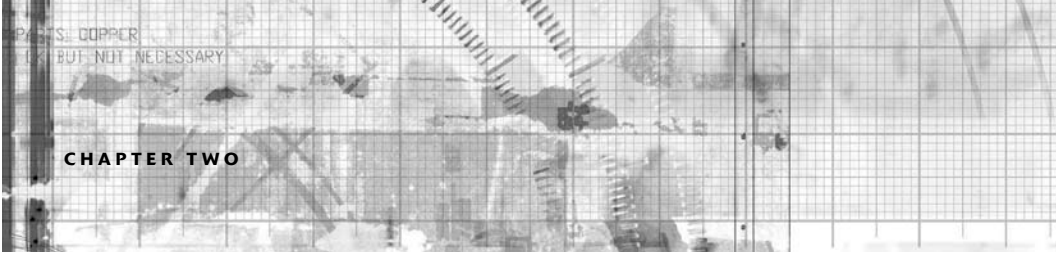
WHAT THIS SECTION IS ABOUT

I wrote in the introduction that *Ask Me Anything 2* includes not just new material, but new kinds of material. The differences start right here. *Ask Me Anything 1* included a section called "Faith on Campus Stuff". Though I still like what I put in it, that title gave the impression that some things on campus are related to faith and others aren't. Actually that's not true; everything is related to faith.

The reason you're on campus, though, is chiefly to learn how to think. You're there to learn other things too—like the wisdom traditions of your civilization and the things you need to know for your future profession—but learning to think comes first.

Thinking means reasoning, not feeling. It also means thinking *faithfully*. As a great Christian of our time has written, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."⁴

Some of your professors may disagree, so "Learning to Think Stuff" talks about that problem too.



CHAPTER TWO

I FEEL LIKE, THEREFORE I AM

THINK WITH YOUR FEELINGS, FEEL WITH YOUR—NO, WAIT—

Once again, the lock on my office door wasn't cooperating with the key. I felt like a safecracker. Insert the key just so—apply just enough twisting force to feel resistance—withdraw it gradually—wait for the resistance to disappear—then turn it all the way. This was my third try.

Maybe that's why I didn't see her coming. Just as the key finally turned, she came rolling around the corner like a tiny armored troop carrier. What happened when we collided was a perfect demonstration of the law of conservation of momentum. Body A came to a dead stop; Body B rebounded. Fortunately, Body B landed on his softest part. Body A stood horrified, mouth open, backpack clutched to her chest.

I looked up at her five feet, two inches. Julie. I might have known. "Never mind what they say on the artillery range," I grunted. "What you lack in mass, you make up in velocity."

"Professor Theophilus! I'm so sorry! Are you all right? Did you get hurt? Why aren't you getting up?"

Though I would have preferred to sit still, I got to my feet and limped into my office just to keep her from fretting. Gingerly, I sat down at my desk. She stood in the doorway uncertainly. "Are you sure you're all right? Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes, I'm sure, and yes, you can do something. First, you can pour me a cup of that cold coffee over there." She grimaced, but did as I asked. "Much better," I said, sipping. "Second, you can tell me what

gives with the Girl-Shot-from-Cannon act."

"Girl shot from—oh," Julie's ears flushed pink. "I should have looked where I was going. But I'd just got my first essay back from Professor Thanatos, and when I saw my grade—I was so upset—I could hardly—" A new thought painted itself across her face. She sat down. "Professor Theophilus, since I'm here, would you do me a big, big favor?"

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that 'big, big.'"

"I know *you* didn't assign my essay. But would you read it anyway and tell me if *you* think it's really awful?"

"Julie, I try not to second-guess my colleagues' grading decisions."

"I'm not asking you to second-guess anything. But just *look* at this." She fished the essay out of her backpack and began to turn over the pages. "Page one, no comment. Page two, no comment. Pages three, four, five, no comment. See? Finally, bottom of page six, 'Weak argumentation, flaccid organization.' That's all. When I asked Professor Thanatos to explain, he just said, 'This is the university, Miss Terwilliger. You must sink or swim.'"

Yes, that sounded like Thanatos. I sighed. "Hand it over."

Five minutes passed as I penciled little check marks in the margins. "All right," I said finally, "let's talk." Julie perched herself nervously right on the edge of her chair.

"I won't tell you what grade I would have given the essay, but I can offer some basic critique."

"That's all I wanted."

"For starters, look at your introductory paragraph. There's no thesis statement."

"No what?"

"Thesis. You need to say what it is that you're going to prove. Even if you're not proving anything, you need to explain what question you're going to answer or what problem you're going to solve. But

you don't do any of those things."

Her ears flushed again. "But I feel like I did. See, right here I say, 'My essay is about the existence of God.'"

"An 'about' statement is not the same as a thesis statement, Julie. It doesn't tell me what you want to accomplish in the essay. I could read the whole thing and still not know whether you'd succeeded."

"But I feel like the essay itself shows what I'm trying to accomplish."

"You may 'feel like' it does, but it doesn't. See here, in paragraph three you seem to be asking whether God exists. But in paragraph five you seem to be asking whether most people *think* He exists, and in paragraph eight you seem to be asking whether people who talk about God all mean the same thing. Is there some big question that links these three little ones together, or are you just meandering? You never tell me."

Her flush deepened and began to spread.

"Here's another thing," I said. "Look at the argument here in paragraph four. You seem to be reasoning 'all A are X, and all B are X, so all A are B,' but that doesn't follow. It's like saying, 'All dogs are four-legged animals, and all cats are four-legged animals, so all dogs are cats.' They aren't. Sometimes that's called 'faking the connection.'"

Her voice went up a full octave. "I haven't faked anything!"

"I don't mean you've tried to deceive. That's just one of the names for the fallacy."

"But I don't *feel* like I've committed a fallacy! You're just not being *fair*," Julie complained. Surprised, I looked up. The flush had reached her nose, and her eyes looked moist. "I feel you're just *looking* for things wrong."

I set down the pencil, pushed back my chair, hooked my thumbs in my pockets, and smiled. "Well, of course I am. You asked me to."

"After all the *effort* I put into the essay, you say it's no good!"

"I haven't yet said whether I think it's good or bad."

"I feel that's *exactly* what you're doing."

"But you asked me to do that too." I opened the drawer and pantomimed lifting out a tape recorder and setting it on the desk between us. "Rewind. Stop. Play. 'Professor Theophilus, would you read my essay and tell me if it's really awful?'"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she said. "I'm doing it again." I handed her a box of tissues. She blew her nose. "Just like I always do."

"What is it that you always do?"

"I *always* get like this when I'm criticized. Even when it's good for me and I've asked for it," she sniffled, "like today." She took another tissue. "Now that I'm in college, I'm *always* being judged. I love my subject, but sometimes I dread going to class. When I get criticisms from teachers or classmates, I just cringe." She wiped the corners of her eyes. "How can I stop being so hypersensitive?"

"Do you really want to know?" I asked. "It may feel like another criticism."

She blew her nose one more time. "Yes. Tell me."

"Then the first thing to consider is what you *gain* from being hypersensitive."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that anyone who criticizes you is punished with emotional recriminations. You use them to shut people up before they've said all they meant to say, and to put the blame on them. That makes you feel better, but you pay a high price because you don't hear things you need to hear. Do you need the tissue box again?"

Her eyes went from my face, to the box, then back again. She shook her head. I smiled and continued.

"The second thing you need to do is to retrain your attention. When I criticized your work today, you didn't talk about the work, but about yourself."

"But everything I said was about the work!"

"Play back the tape again. Listen to what you said. You 'felt like' you had made your thesis clear. You 'felt like' you had reasoned well. You 'felt like' you hadn't committed fallacies. None of those feelings were in the essay. They were in you. Julie, no matter what you're feeling when someone criticizes your work, don't make your feelings the subject. Make the work the subject."

"You want me to think less about myself," she said. "But it seems to me that I don't think *enough* of myself. If I had more self-esteem, then I wouldn't be so hypersensitive."

I laughed. "Nothing you've said suggests that you lack confidence. What you lack is the humility to hear criticism. Your problem isn't humility, but the cardinal sin of pride."

"Pride? But—but *I* don't think I'm better than everyone else!"

"Irrelevant. Pride says, 'It's all about me.' That attitude can manifest itself in more than one way. If I'm selfish, I treat my *wants* as what it's all about. If I'm conceited, I treat my *worth* as what it's all about. You're not selfish or conceited, so you think you're not proud. Yet just a few minutes ago, you were treating your *hurt feelings* as what it's all about."

"You think *that's* pride?"

I shrugged. "It fits the definition. What do you think?"

Julie glanced at her watch, grabbed her backpack, and stood up. "I have to get to class, but I'll come back tomorrow. Will you hold on to my essay for me?"

"Certainly. Why?"

She paused on her way out and looked back through the door. "My arguments," she said. "I think I should hear the rest of your criticisms."