

CHOOSING YOUR

FAITH

In a World of Spiritual Options



FOREWORD BY **LEE STROBEL**

MARK MITTELBERG

 **WILLOW**
Willow Creek Resources



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“Mark Mittelberg has emerged as a well-reasoned voice in the conversation about faith. He prompts healthy thought and stirs valid questions. He achieves the admirable goals of speaking to hearts and minds about the hope God offers us.”

MAX LUCADO, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
3:16: The Numbers of Hope

“This may well be the most important book you read this year! Embark on a journey of spiritual discovery and let Mark’s remarkable insights revolutionize your life.”

LEE STROBEL, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
The Case for the Real Jesus

“*Choosing Your Faith* raises the critical questions that every human being needs to ask, and guides us into understanding the importance of knowing why we believe what we do.”

DAN KIMBALL, AUTHOR OF
They Like Jesus but Not the Church

Ever since I met Mark Mittelberg in the 1990s, I have been impressed by his ministry, his faith, his passion, and his commitment. His wisdom and insight into the world of faith has helped many throughout the United States and the world, and I consider it a joy whenever I get the chance to work with him.

Mark is a sharp, clear, and effective communicator, and there is no better example of that than this book. A lot of books tell you what to believe. But *Choosing Your Faith*, written in Mark’s articulate and effective manner, shows you how to *decide* what to believe. Read it. You are sure to be challenged and encouraged.

LUIS PALAU, INTERNATIONAL SPEAKER AND AUTHOR

TO MY WONDERFUL PARENTS,
ORLAND AND VIRGINIA MITTELBERG,
WHO PATIENTLY PROVIDED SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE,
BUT GRACIOUSLY ALLOWED ME TO
CHOOSE MY FAITH.

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FOREWORD

by Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Faith*

I wish this book had been available on January 20, 1980.

That's the day I decided to reevaluate my atheism and consider whether there was any convincing evidence to believe in God—*any* God, whether the God of Islam, Christianity, Mormonism, Judaism, or even the multiplicity of gods in Hinduism. Impressed by my wife's transformation since she had become a Christian, I vowed to use my training in journalism and law (I was the legal-affairs editor of the *Chicago Tribune*) to launch a full-fledged investigation of spiritual matters.

My quest would have been considerably easier if I'd had this invaluable guide at the time. As Mark Mittelberg brilliantly describes, all of us take different pathways in our journeys of spiritual discovery. Whether we realize it or not, we're influenced by a myriad of factors, some of which can take us toward the truth, while others simply lead us into confusion. These insights would have been extremely helpful as I tried to sort through the competing spiritual beliefs on my own.

You're fortunate—if you're a spiritual seeker, you've now got this terrific guidebook to help you maneuver through the minefield of conflicting and contradictory claims about spirituality. You'll find Mark to be a thoughtful, empathetic, and discerning friend as you go through this eye-opening and heart-expanding process together.

But this book isn't intended only for seekers. Christians also will discover their own spiritual style, which will serve to bolster their beliefs, while at the same time helping them to better understand how they can assist their friends as they seek a faith that makes sense.

I can't think of anyone who is better positioned than Mark to serve as your spiritual coach. Yes, he has excellent academic credentials, having earned a graduate degree in philosophy of religion. But beyond that, Mark has spent the last two decades helping everyday

people figure out how to choose their faith. He lives in the trenches of real life, not in some distant ivory tower.

You'll find that Mark isn't going to preach at you. He gives due consideration to various approaches to the spiritual realm. His style in this book is to walk alongside you as you weigh the spiritual options and come to your own conclusions about where the evidence convincingly points.

Having been Mark's friend and ministry partner for twenty years, I can attest to his sterling character, his godly lifestyle, and his heartfelt desire to assist others as they seek the truth about spiritual topics. Does he have his own convictions about God? You bet. But he's not going to try to unilaterally impose them on you. Instead, he wants to befriend you as you embark on the most exciting and stimulating journey of your life, discovering for yourself where the truth really resides.

Every Monday, Mark and I get together for lunch. It's one of the highlights of my week because I'm constantly learning something new from him. We talk about the mundane and the lofty, but we frequently circle back to discussing how we can know for sure that our spiritual beliefs are well-placed. One thing amazes me: Mark's deep reservoir of wisdom never runs dry.

So pull up a chair and join us. Wherever you are in your spiritual adventure, you're going to find yourself encouraged and challenged. But most of all, you're going to walk away with everything you need to make the most important faith decisions of your life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would never have been able to complete this book about choosing a faith path without first having been the recipient of the faith, support, encouragement, and prayers of the following people:

Lee Strobel, my close friend and ministry partner of twenty years, who spurred me on and helped me move forward from the inception to the completion of this project. He said it well when he once wrote, “We’re each other’s biggest boosters. I have more confidence in Mark than he has in himself, and that’s how he feels about me. That makes for a terrific combination!” It was my turn to be on the receiving end of that encouragement, and I am deeply grateful.

To Heidi, my incredibly supportive and patient wife, and our two great teenage kids, Emma Jean and Matthew—thanks for the prayers and cheers, not to mention coffee and snacks at odd times of the day and night, frequent ping-pong matches, and occasional breaks for ice cream or walks around the lake with our little pal Charlie (the Cavalier).

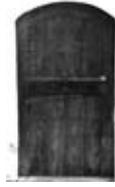
Thanks to Dr. Chad Meister for your philosophical wisdom and editorial input. Your generous sharing of knowledge and insights served me and the readers of this book immeasurably. Thanks, too, to Brad Mitchell, for reading the manuscript and providing feedback, as well as for providing spiritual “air support.” Tom Chapin and Nabeel Qureshi also gave important feedback at critical points.

Appreciation to Don Pape, who helped get the ball rolling, and to Beth Jusino at Alive Communications, who helped keep it on track and who provided shots of encouragement along the way. I’m also indebted to my philosophical mentors, the late Bob Passantino and his wife Gretchen, William Lane Craig, Norman Geisler, and especially Stuart Hackett—including the early influence of a dusty old textbook Dr. Hackett assigned to his students: *The Ways of Knowing* by William Montague.

Thanks, as well, for the partnering efforts and encouragement of Scott and Susan Evans, Ron Forseth, Jennifer Dion, Eric Abel, Lynne Marian, Chad Cannon, Kim Levings, and all my friends at Outreach, Inc. Also, the support of Paul Braoudakis of the Willow Creek Association, Bill Dallas and Jay Mitchell of CCN, as well as the prayers and encouragement of Chris and Carla Wilson, Karl and Barbara Singer, Kevin and Sherry Harney, Nancy Grisham, Terry Schulenburg, Mike Licon, Hillis and Jean Hugelen, and Orland and Ginny Mittelberg.

Last, but certainly not least, a special thanks to Jon Farrar, Ron Beers, and the team at Tyndale House Publishers for believing in me. Also, to my editor, Dave Lindstedt, for making sure my words made sense, as well as to Maria Eriksen, Charlie Swaney, and their great teams for getting the word out about this book.

To all of you—and to any I failed to mention—I offer my sincere thanks.



C H A P T E R O N E

“WHY
CHOOSE ANY
FAITH?”

“*Choose* a faith”? Why would anyone even want one?

Faith sounds dangerously close to *religion*—and the rock band R.E.M. pretty well expressed the feelings of a generation when they released their infectious anthem “Losing My Religion.” Never mind whether anybody, including me, ever really understood what the song was about. Michael Stipe, the guy who wrote and sang the lyrics, said in an interview that the phrase “losing my religion” is actually a figure of speech that means “coming to the end of

your rope.” “And,” he added, “it’s a secular song and has little or nothing to do with religion.”¹

But that hasn’t stopped countless people from singing their hearts out whenever the song plays on the radio:

THAT’S ME IN THE CORNER
THAT’S ME IN THE SPOTLIGHT
I’M LOSING MY RELIGION
TRYING TO KEEP UP WITH YOU²

I looked up the song on YouTube.com and read the comments people had written about it. Even now, roughly two decades after the song was first released, people are still trying to figure it out:

ANIMEMMA (3 MONTHS AGO)

THIS IS A GOOD SONG B/C RELIGION IS FALSE

NAKASHIOO (3 MONTHS AGO)

ANIMEMMA, LOSING MY RELIGION IS SOUTHERN SLANG FOR
BEING FED UP, IDIOT

Not that there aren’t plenty of reasons, with or without R.E.M.’s song, to feel ambivalent about—or even negative toward—the realm of religion. Most of us have at least a few reasons of our own. Mine, admittedly, are not all that weighty.

For me, it’s the memory of having to get up every Sunday, earlier than it seemed any kid should have to on a weekend, and rushing around trying to get ready, putting on what my family called “Sunday clothes.” These were articles of apparel I’d never think of wearing any other day of the week. They were usually too small, or too large (“It’s okay,” my dad would say. “You’ll grow into them.”); out of style (as if they were

ever *in style*); and often itchy. Sometimes, my parents even made me wear a sport coat and tie! I’m pretty sure that today, particularly where I live in Southern California, the Department of Children and Family Services would take kids out of a home for that kind of abuse—especially when the top button on my shirt was always too tight and would choke me whenever I tried to breathe. Occasionally, even now, thinking about going to church can give me a pinching sensation in the front of my throat.

Almost without exception, after finally getting ready, I’d bound down the stairs to find the house empty. But that didn’t mean I was off the hook. It meant I had to run out to the street to discover that my family was already in the car, waiting impatiently for me.

“Hurry up, Mark, we’re running late again!”

By the time we got to church, I’d be so out of sorts that it was really hard to think about lofty things like God or serious spiritual stuff.

Later, when I was in junior high and then in high school, I became increasingly aware of how strange most church music was. The organ produced notes that were eerily similar to the sounds I’d heard in low-budget haunted-house movies. In fact, most of the traditional church songs (*hymns*, to use the proper word) were written by people from another era, apparently *for* the people from another era—people who liked to sit in pews and sing hymns before going to hang out with their friends in the church “narthex” or “vestibule.” I remember one service in which none of the nine songs played had been written within the past one hundred years—and some dated back several centuries. Nothing against relics or antiques, but it struck me

that there was something anachronistic and culturally out-of-sync about much of what I was experiencing in my religious environment.

Increasingly, I came to view my life in two categories: normal and religious. *Normal* related to everyday, ordinary life,



It struck me that there was something anachronistic and culturally out-of-sync about much of what I was experiencing in my religious environment.

like school, spending time with my friends, and having fun. *Religious* related to weighty things like faith, beliefs, teachings about right and wrong—and a Sunday experience with nice (often overly nice) people, who meant well but sometimes seemed to come from a planet far from the world I lived in. And that world—the normal one—was the one that was becoming more and more exciting to me, while the religious one was becoming . . . well, increasingly distant and boring. I reached the point

where I was rapidly losing interest in all things spiritual and wanted to minimize my exposure to religion in general.

I still had to go to church services during that time, however, so a couple of my renegade friends and I would do whatever we could to make the Sunday experience more bearable. Sometimes, we'd hide out in the furnace room in the church basement until the service was over. We'd sit quietly, listen carefully, and try to time things so that we could nonchalantly emerge and blend into the departing crowd.

Other times, we'd sit through the service, but we'd look for ways to amuse ourselves as the minutes slowly ticked by. For instance, sometimes we'd take turns seeing who could hold his

breath the longest. I can only imagine what the people sitting around us must have thought as my friends and I hyperventilated to collect maximum levels of oxygen in our lungs, and then took a huge, time-me-on-this-one breath and held it for as long as we possibly could. A strange way to pass the time, I know—but one fine Sunday morning I did manage to break the three-minute barrier!



As I mentioned, my adolescent problems with religion were trivial compared to those of many other people, perhaps even your own. For some, the issues are really serious, like those of my friend who, as a young man, left his church after experiencing abuse at the hands of religious leaders. These were the very people who should have been nurturing and protecting him, not to mention setting a good example. That was many years ago, but even now he's not showing any interest in ever going back.

Reports of abusive clergy have grown increasingly frequent in recent years. And as awful as they are, I don't know which is worse: the crimes themselves, or the cover-ups at higher levels of leadership—where often those in charge merely reassigned the perpetrators, time and again, to new territories, foisting the offenders upon fresh, unsuspecting parishes.

When it isn't sexual impropriety making the news these days, it seems it's financial corruption. We've certainly seen enough of those stories over the years.

But problems tied to religion are not isolated to Protestants and Catholics. In recent years, the Muslim world has been rocked by horrendous events such as the 9/11 attacks and increasing instances of terrorism around the world. It's to

the point where the concepts of “Islam” and “terrorism” have become inseparable in many people’s minds. Though this connection may not be fair to many peace-loving Muslims, the perception is a reality that colors the way we all look at the subject of religion, and it may affect whether we’d ever be willing to actually consider choosing a faith of our own.

Add to these examples the many cults and religious groups that stand on street corners or show up uninvited to knock on our doors, as they try to sell us their materials and recruit us into their flocks. University students in particular have to be cautious. There was a time when, with one weak moment, they could find themselves off somewhere at a remote retreat with a bunch of smiling, zombie-like zealots. These people promised them happiness but systematically robbed them of their identity, individuality, and relationships—as well as their dreams for the future. And while these groups’ followers gave up everything they had to serve and spread their message, their leaders often indulged in material excess and outright immorality as they privately, and sometimes even publicly, modeled everything that was contrary to the religious piety they claimed to represent. Today, many of those aberrant religious groups have become more subtle in their approach, but they can be every bit as damaging to those they snare.

This hypocrisy and abuse leave such a strong taste in people’s mouths that they have helped foster a new movement of authors and influencers who not only reject religion for themselves but teach that all of it—from the bizarre cults to the benign corner congregations—is dangerous and evil for everyone else, too. Examples include books like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, and *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher

Hitchens. Or consider the words of Rosie O’Donnell, who declared on the national TV show *The View*, “Radical Christianity is just as threatening as radical Islam.”

The message is clear: *If you mess around with religion, you do so at your own risk. And if you get too serious about it, the effects can be devastating. So why even mess with it at all?*

But here’s what’s interesting: Though antireligious sentiment seems to be spreading throughout society, there’s a simultaneous resurgence of interest in spiritual matters. Just look at a few examples:

- the growing roster of TV specials and news programs discussing Jesus, the history and background of the Bible, archeological discoveries, claims of the miraculous, and Christianity contrasted to other world religions
- the increasing number of faith-oriented films showing up in local theaters—some of which, like Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, have become worldwide blockbusters
- the array of religious themes featured on the covers of newsmagazines, especially around Christmas and Easter, as well as on Internet blogs, podcasts, and Web sites
- the scriptural subjects of some of the songs on the popular music charts, from the once ubiquitous “What If God Was One of Us” to many of the songs by religiously oriented bands such as U2, Creed, P.O.D., Lifehouse, Switchfoot, and The Fray

Apparently, spirituality sells. But it wouldn't sell if it weren't scratching an itch. As it has often been observed, people are, generally speaking, "incurably religious."

The studies and statistics bear this out. A recent Gallup poll found that 94 percent of people in the United States still believe in God or in a universal spirit.³ In an average week, more people attend American churches than attend all American sporting events combined.⁴ And the Bible, even after so much skepticism has been spread about its message and historical validity, continues to be the best-selling book of all time—by a long shot. Karl Marx said that religion is "the opium of the masses." I guess people are having a hard time giving up the addiction.

But at a deeper level, don't you feel the pull yourself? After all the bad raps and beatings that religion has taken in recent years, why is it that so many people are still so interested? And why are you yourself drawn to spirituality enough to be willing to pick up and read—at least this far—a book about faith?



A recent Gallup poll found that 94 percent of people in the United States still believe in God or in a universal spirit.

Why do we so often look at the beauty of a sunset or observe the wonder of childbirth and sense that there has got to be something undergirding all of this at a deeper level?

What is it that makes us aware, at least in our more honest, lying-awake moments, that there really must be more to life than the flurry of activities that keeps our heads spinning but our souls shrinking as we slog along, day after day, year after year? Why is it that we often feel a longing for a truly calm and centered life, one

that is more in tune with the transcendent and less caught up in the tumultuous here and now? Where does the guilt that we sometimes grapple with emanate from—and what can we do to alleviate those guilty feelings and the sense of spiritual inadequacy that so often weigh us down?

It's easy to criticize and even write off organized religion with some of its incompetent or even corrupt spiritual leaders and their annoying antics. These targets are obvious and hard not to hit—but focusing on them fails to address the deeper aching of our souls, the inescapable awareness that life as we know it is not as it was intended to be, the knowledge that we need some kind of outside help to really get things right. What do we do with all that?

Maybe you can relate to some of this, but because you're suspicious of *all* faiths, you don't feel ready to hear about how to choose one for yourself. You'd rather wait it out until you can "just know"—rather than put your trust in anything. If that's how you feel, I've got to tell you something that might be a bit surprising and even unsettling: You've already got a "faith," and you're living by trust in that faith daily. Really!



Think about your day so far. This morning, you got up and had breakfast—by faith—trusting that nobody in the house had laced your food with poison. You stopped at a coffee shop and somehow trusted those characters behind the counter (is that really a good idea?) not to put some kind of harmful substance in your triple-shot, extra foam latte. You got to work—maybe even took the elevator?—and sat in a chair, by faith, without testing it first to see if it was still strong enough to hold you.

You started your computer and typed in confidential information, even though you knew that the latest Internet virus could take that information and broadcast it to everyone in your address book. At lunch, you went out for a walk and paused to bend down and pat a stranger's dog, believing you wouldn't become one of the 4.7 million Americans bitten by a dog each year (of whom 1,008 have to go to the emergency room *every day*). Then, at the end of the day, you aimed your car toward home and drove down the street, trusting-but-not-really-knowing that some sixteen-year-old NASCAR wannabe wouldn't be out drag racing his friends, careening toward you at a high rate of speed.

No doubt about it—you live your life by faith every day, even in the mundane details. You may have what seem like good reasons for your faith, which is fine, but you could also be wrong about some of your conclusions. And some of those mistakes could be serious, even life threatening.

More than that, even if you're a thoroughly nonreligious person, you're living with the hope that your nonreligious beliefs are accurate, and that you won't someday face a thoroughly religious Maker who, come to find out, actually did once issue a list of moral requirements, which you routinely failed to pay attention to.

"Oh, I never worry about things like that," you may say. But that statement itself is an expression of faith that it's okay not to concern oneself with such things. You don't *know* that they are unimportant—you just *believe* that to be the case. That's part of your own particular version of nonreligious faith.

Even well-known atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris live their lives with an unproven assumption that there is no God and that the opinions they express are ulti-

mately helping and not harming themselves and others. They don't *know* that they are correct—they just *hope* so.

In fact, Dawkins, who is probably the greatest evangelist for atheism of our day, admitted in an interview recorded in *Time* magazine that "there could be something incredibly grand and incomprehensible and beyond our present understanding."

Biochemist Francis Collins, who was arguing the other side in the interview, shot back, "That's God."

Dawkins replied, "Yes. But it could be any of a billion Gods. It could be God of the Martians or of the inhabitants of Alpha Centauri. The chance of its being a particular God, Yahweh, the God of Jesus, is vanishingly small—at the least, the onus is on you to demonstrate why you think that's the case."⁵

Whether the chances are large or small, the important thought to catch here is that *Dawkins doesn't know there is no God*—and he even concedes the possibility that some kind of God might actually exist. Rather, he takes it on *faith* that there actually is no God.

Now, I'm sure he would argue that this is an educated conclusion, supported by the preponderance of evidence. But even if he turned out to be right, it doesn't change the fact that his conclusion is based on faith. In other words, it's a conclusion that seems to him to be the right one, based on the data he has examined—but one that goes beyond what can be proven or known with complete certainty.

That's just the way life is. We *all* live by some form of faith.



Even if you're a thoroughly nonreligious person, you're living with the hope that your nonreligious beliefs are accurate.

Which leads us to the central question: Is ours a well-founded faith? A wise faith? A faith that makes sense and is supported by the facts? One that works in real life and is worth hanging on to?

More personally, is yours a faith you've really thought about, carefully evaluated, and intentionally chosen—or did you just slide into it at some point along the way?



When I got to college, I came to the painful realization that I'd grown into my particular version of faith rather passively. I'd been raised believing in God, trusting in the Bible, and having faith that the church was the carrier of God's truth. And I had an unsubstantiated and naive confidence in the truth of all this.

Then I signed up for some philosophy classes. One of my professors, who was a religious man of a different stripe, seemed to delight in dismantling the simplistic beliefs of many of his Christian students—and I felt like I was a favorite target. He skillfully pointed out problems with the Bible, with what he called “traditional views about God,” and with most of the things I'd been taught to believe. His intellectual onslaught woke me up and made me face the fact that I'd bought into a belief system that I barely understood and had never critically analyzed.

I hardly knew how to respond, and I have to admit that my attempts to get better answers from some of the leaders at my church were generally disheartening. For example, I told one of my teachers that my faith was being assailed in school and that I needed a deeper understanding not only of what we believed, but also of why we thought it was correct.

“How do we know that the Bible is really true and that it is actually God’s Word?” I asked. I’ll never forget his reply: “Oh that’s easy, it says right here in the New Testament that ‘all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.’”

“Yes, but how do we know that what *that* says is true?” I replied.

“Because it says it is,” he answered, “and it’s God’s Word.”

“But that’s the very question we’re trying to answer,” I shot back. “If all you do is appeal to the Bible’s claims to prove that the Bible is true, then you’re guilty of circular reasoning, and you’ve proved nothing.”

He looked at me like he was certain I was rapidly sinking into the quicksands of liberalism or skepticism—or had already become an actual infidel—and then, with a deep breath, took another run at it: “But you need to realize that there’s no higher authority than God’s revelation. If God says it’s true, then you can bank your life on it.”

“Okay,” I replied wearily, “but how do you know that God’s really the one talking here? Lots of religious books claim to be God talking—and you don’t believe those other books.”

“*That’s because,*” he said triumphantly, “*those other books are not the Word of God!*”

At this point, I was frustrated enough to wish I could imitate Indiana Jones in that scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where he finally gets fed up with his sword-wielding opponent’s



*When I got to college,
I came to the painful
realization that
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antics and just pulls out his pistol and shoots the guy. Of course I'm only kidding (at least now I am). But it was becoming abundantly clear to me that logic was not going to get me any further in that conversation, so I finally just had to let it go—although I was left with the same questions churning in my mind.

Subsequently, I found some people and books that were a lot more helpful. I'll come back to my story later, but this exasperating interchange, and others like it along the way, helped me realize that lots of religious people hold firmly to all kinds of religious ideas—whether right or wrong—for all kinds of weak and apparently unfounded, or at least unexamined, reasons. I determined then and there that whether I ended up agreeing with the faith of my upbringing or choosing a completely different point of view, my conclusion would have to be based on more solid criteria than what some of my teachers and leaders were apparently clinging to.



I recently bought a new mountain bike. That may not sound like a big deal to you, but for me it was quite an event. That's because I no longer live in the Midwest where most of my "mountain biking" was really just *biking without any mountains*—or even any serious hills, for that matter. Now I live in the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains of California, and I knew it was time to finally research and invest in a full suspension, no-nonsense mountain bike. So I subscribed to *Mountain Bike Action* magazine, searched online, and started reading all kinds of reviews and articles.

I knew I wanted a bike that would be lightweight but also extremely durable. So I studied up on the pros and cons of the

various options for frame materials, including steel, titanium, aluminum, and carbon fiber. That last option seemed the most unlikely choice, at least at first, because I was planning to go on some serious trails—with big rocks, sharp turns, and plenty of drops and obstacles—and the idea of entrusting my safety to some kind of newfangled synthetic glass or plastic or whatever-it-really-is frame just didn't seem like a good idea.

But I kept reading and researching, doing Google searches on the Internet, and talking to any expert who would take the time to interact with me. Guess what I learned? Carbon fiber is stronger than aluminum or steel and is even lighter than titanium. It's expensive, but it provides a great combination of strength and weight, and it looks good, too.

I probably don't need to tell you I ended up buying a carbon-fiber mountain bike. After months of research, I bought the top frame for the money, and I also carefully researched, read reviews, and got expert advice on the best components to build onto the frame, including the fork, rear shock, crank, derailleurs, shifters, brakes (front and rear hydraulic disc brakes, no less), handlebar, stem, seat post, saddle, wheel sets, tires—I even spent a fair amount of time reading up on the best pedals and riding shoes to purchase.

The result is that I now have a bike I love to ride, and it is serving me really well. (Honestly, it's gotta be the coolest bike on the planet. It oughta be—I paid the price of a motorcycle,



Lots of religious people hold firmly to all kinds of religious ideas—whether right or wrong—for all kinds of weak and apparently unfounded, or at least unexamined, reasons.

but got a cycle without the motor. Worse, I discovered that *I'm* the motor.)

Why do I explain all this? To point out that many of us spend more time reading up on, researching, and seeking wisdom about decisions that are of low-to-moderate importance—like what bike to purchase, which car or SUV to drive, what clothes to wear for a special occasion, what shrubs or flowers to plant in the garden, which university to attend, or (you fill in the blank)—than we do on monumental issues like where our faith is currently focused, and whether it's well placed or ought to be redirected to more deserving objects and tenets of trust.

Don't you think it is worth spending some significant time reflecting on your faith?

Let me join you. My goal is to help you think through what kind of beliefs are worth choosing and to understand which criteria are helpful, or not helpful, in making that decision. In



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other words, I'm not so much trying to show you what to believe—everybody is constantly doing that—as I am trying to coach you in how to figure it out, weighing the various methods of choosing, and only then looking at some of the actual information to consider.

This is crucial, because the approach you use to make your selection has a huge bearing on the outcome of your decision. You owe it to yourself not only to think about what your final choice will be, but to first step back and *think about how you're thinking about it*.

Most people never consider this. They just arbitrarily pick

up an approach (or accept one that’s been handed to them) and uncritically employ it to select a belief system that may or may not be the best one. I’m sure you don’t want to follow their pattern. That’s why we’re going to examine six different approaches, or what we’re describing as six “faith paths,” that people characteristically take in order to arrive at their spiritual point of view.

Once you’ve identified which faith path you’re on, you’ll be ready to evaluate whether that path is serving you well, or whether you should consider other, more reliable routes toward discovering what’s true and worth trusting.⁶

I don’t know where this important journey will take you—but it’s imperative that you invest real time and energy in this vital area of your life in order to make certain you choose your faith wisely. I’m confident that you’ll be really glad you did.

NOTES

Chapter 1—“Why Choose *Any* Faith?”

1. This is from an interview with Michael Stipe of the band R.E.M. on BBC Radio 2. See the article and the link to the audio interview at www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/soldonsong/songlibrary/losingmyreligion.shtml.
2. “Losing My Religion” by William T. Berry, Peter Lawrence Buck, Michael E. Mills, and Michael Stipe. Copyright © 1991 Night Garden Music/Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp. (BMI). All rights reserved.
3. Frank Newport, “Americans More Likely to Believe in God than the Devil, Heaven More than Hell,” *Gallup News Service*, June 13, 2007.
4. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 97–98.
5. David Van Biema, “God vs. Science,” *Time*, November 5, 2006.
6. To help you identify your current faith path, a self-assessment quiz is available in the booklet *Your Faith Path* by Mark Mittelberg (Tyndale, 2008).

Chapter 2—“This Is *My* Truth—You Find Your Own”

1. Transcribed and excerpted from a video of this exchange between Bill O’Reilly and Richard Dawkins on the Fox News television program *The O’Reilly Factor* on April 23, 2007, posted at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wECrVNRquvI.
2. John 18:38
3. Ronald Harwood, screenwriter for *The Pianist* (in “Story of Survival” in the DVD’s bonus materials, starting at 7:20), Limited Soundtrack Edition, 2003.
4. *A Companion to Epistemology* (*Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*) s.v. “Relativism.”
5. Zechariah 8:19 says, “So love truth and peace.”
6. *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, s.v. “Socrates.”

Chapter 3—“But I’ve *Always* Believed What I Believe”

1. Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery,” *New Yorker*. June 28, 1948. Emphasis added.
2. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 249–250.
3. Mark 7:5-8. This passage is paralleled in Matthew 15:1-9. Occasionally throughout this book, I’ll quote passages from the Bible. I’ll give reasons in a later chapter for why I’m convinced the Bible has unique credentials that give strong evidence of its truthfulness and divine inspiration. But regardless of what you think of the Bible, I hope you’ll seriously think about my reasons for quoting it here, and at least view these passages as ancient wisdom and history worthy of your consideration.
4. Isaiah 29:13

FOR FURTHER READING

Choosing Your Faith New Testament, with notes by Mark Mittelberg (Tyndale, 2008)

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 1998)

The Case for Faith by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 2000)

The Case for a Creator by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 2004)

The Case for the Real Jesus by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 2007)

More Than a Carpenter by Josh McDowell (Tyndale, 1977)

Know Why You Believe by Paul Little (InterVarsity, 1970)

Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis (Macmillan, 1952)

The Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren (Zondervan, 2002)

Jesus Among Other Gods by Ravi Zacharias (W, 2000)

Putting Jesus in His Place by Robert Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski (Kregel, 2007)

Mormonism 101 by Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson (Baker, 2000)

Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig (Crossway, 2004)

Building Belief by Chad V. Meister (Baker, 2006)

I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek
(Crossway, 2004)

FOR ONLINE RESEARCH

www.LeeStrobel.com — features video clips on a variety of faith questions and issues

www.ReasonableFaith.org — site of William Lane Craig, a great philosopher of religion

www.JesusCentral.com — primary source for information about the Jesus of history

www.Metamorphia.com — discussions on spiritual formation and development

www.WillowCreek.com — click “Find a Church” for relevant places to explore faith

And visit us at www.ChoosingYourFaith.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Mittelberg is a best-selling author, a sought-after speaker, and a leading strategist in outreach and apologetics. He is the author of *Becoming a Contagious Church*; coauthor with Bill Hybels of the best-selling book *Becoming a Contagious Christian*; and a contributing editor to *The Journey: A Bible for the Spiritually Curious*. He is also the primary author of the celebrated *Becoming a Contagious Christian* training course, which has been translated into twenty languages and taught to more than a million people around the world.

Mark was the outreach director for Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association for more than a decade. He was an editorial consultant and a periodic guest for Lee Strobel's weekly television show, *Faith Under Fire*. He is a contributing editor for *Outreach* magazine, and a regular speaker for the Church Communication Network satellite broadcasts to sites across North America. Mark has a master's degree in philosophy of religion from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He lives in Southern California with his wife, Heidi, and their two children.