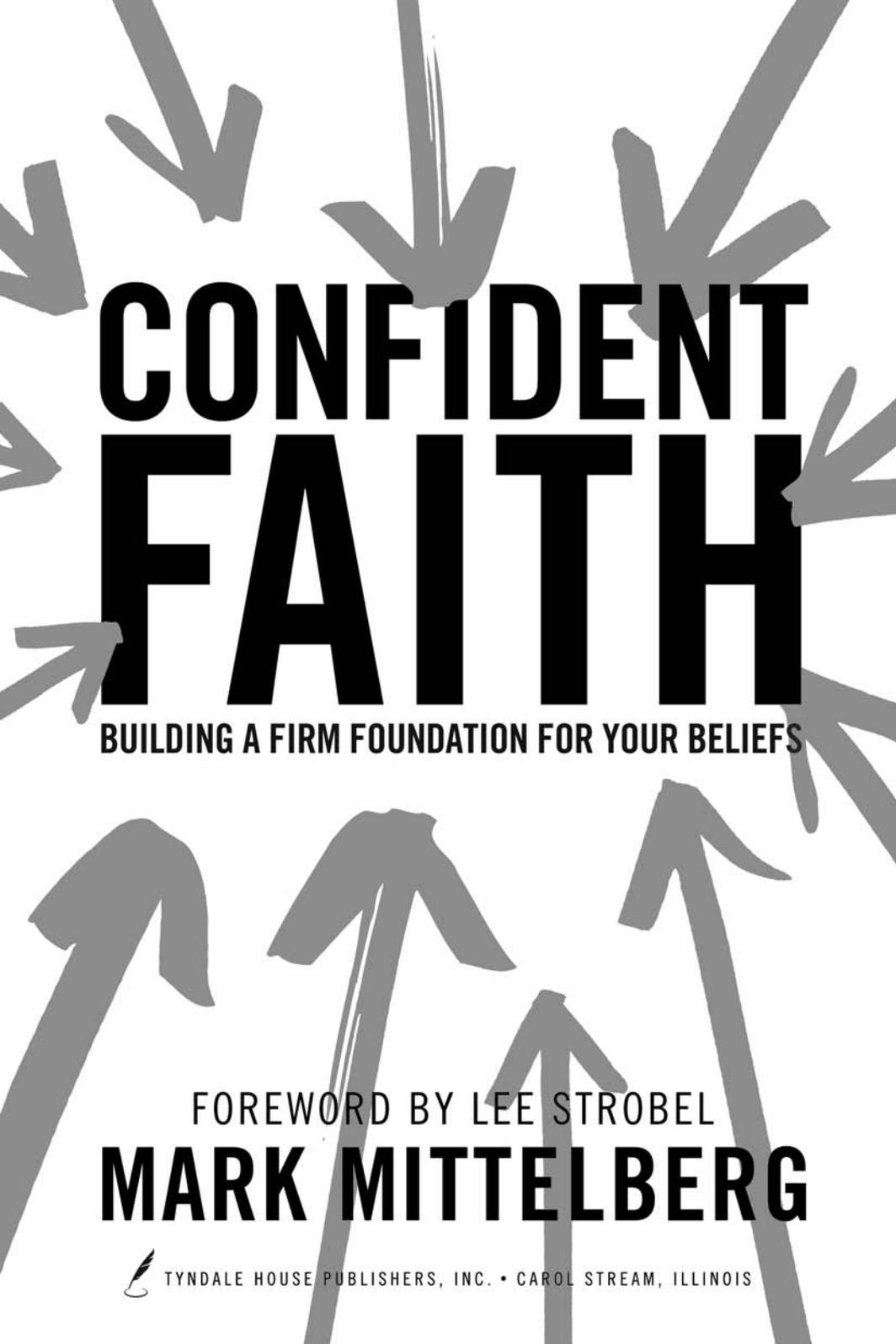
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CONFIDENT FAITH

BUILDING A FIRM FOUNDATION FOR YOUR BELIEFS

FOREWORD BY LEE STROBEL

MARK MITTELBERG



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CONTENTS



Foreword by Lee Strobel vii

How to Use This Book xi

- 1 What Is Faith and Who Has It? 1

SIX FAITH PATHS

- 2 Faith Path Questionnaire 15
- 3 The Relativistic Faith Path: “Truth Is Whatever Works for You” 23
- 4 The Traditional Faith Path: “Truth Is What You’ve Always Been Taught” 39
- 5 The Authoritarian Faith Path: “Truth Is What You’ve Been Told You Must Believe” 57
- 6 The Intuitive Faith Path: “Truth Is What You Feel in Your Heart” 81
- 7 The Mystical Faith Path: “Truth Is What You Think God Told You” 101
- 8 The Evidential Faith Path: “Truth Is What Logic and Evidence Point To” 125
- 9 Assessing the Six Faith Paths 147

TWENTY ARROWS OF TRUTH

- 10 How Science and Logic Point toward Spiritual Truth 161
- 11 How Evidence for the Bible Points toward Spiritual Truth 181
- 12 How History and Experience Point toward Spiritual Truth 201

TEN BARRIERS TO BELIEF

- 13 Breaking through the Barriers to Confident Faith 223
 - 14 Finding a Confident Faith 255
- Notes 265
- For Further Reading 281
- For Online Research 283
- Acknowledgments 284
- About the Author 286



FOREWORD

by Lee Strobel, author of
The Case for Christ and *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 so brilliantly describes, all of us approach faith in differing ways. 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—whether you are a committed Christian or someone who is just beginning your own journey of

spiritual discovery—that you’ve now got this terrific guidebook to help you maneuver through the minefield of conflicting and contradictory claims about what is true. Rest assured that you’ll find Mark to be a thoughtful, empathetic, and discerning friend—and one who also injects regular doses of humor into the discussion—as you go through this eye-opening and heart-expanding process toward a confident faith.

More than that, Mark will give you *reasons* for such confidence. With unusual clarity, he will walk you through such diverse areas as science, philosophy, history, archaeology, religious experience, and evidence related to the Bible as he presents his “twenty arrows” that point compellingly toward the truth of Christianity.

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 and having been mentored by some of the brightest minds in Christendom. But beyond that, Mark has spent the last few decades helping everyday people find a firm foundation for their beliefs. He lives in the trenches of real life, not in some isolated ivory tower.

His style in this book is to walk alongside you as you weigh competing truth claims and come to your own conclusions about where the evidence convincingly points.

Having been Mark’s friend and ministry partner for twenty-five years, I can attest to his sterling character, his godly lifestyle, and his heartfelt desire to assist others as they seek assurance about spiritual truth. His approach is to naturally befriend you as you embark on the most exciting and

stimulating journey of your life, helping you affirm for yourself where the truth really resides.

Almost every Monday, Mark and I get together for lunch. It's a routine we started when we worked together in Chicago, continued when we lived in Southern California, and carry on now in Colorado, where both of our families now reside. 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 please 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 find a truly confident faith in Jesus Christ.



CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS FAITH AND WHO HAS IT?

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen;
it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

HEBREWS 11:1

Think about your day so far.

This morning, you got up and had something to eat—*by faith*—trusting that nobody had laced your food with poison. Perhaps you stopped by a coffee shop and you relied on the character behind the counter not to put some kind of harmful substance in your triple-shot, extra-foam latte. You got to work—maybe even took an elevator?—and sat in an office chair without testing it first to see if it was strong enough to hold you. (This can be a highly dangerous activity. I read once—and I know it *had* to be true because it was on the Internet—that someone sat on what turned out to be a defective chair; it broke, the man was injured, and the accident led to his eventual death! So you just can't be too careful.)

You started your computer and typed in some confidential information, even though you knew that the latest Internet virus could hijack that information and broadcast it to everyone in your address book. During your lunch break you went out for a walk and paused to pat a stranger's dog, assuming you would not join the ranks of the 4.7 million Americans bitten by a dog each year (of whom, on average, 2,425 require medical attention *every day*).¹

Then, at the end of the day, you steered your car onto the road and headed home, trusting (but not really knowing) that some sixteen-year-old NASCAR wannabe wouldn't be out drag racing his friends and come careening toward you at an extreme rate of speed.

No doubt about it—you live your life by faith every day, even in the mundane details. What is faith? My broad definition is *beliefs and actions that are based on something considered to be trustworthy—even in the absence of absolute proof*.

You believed the food was safe, so you ate it; you trusted the chair would hold you, so you sat in it; you've had luck in the past with computers, random canines, and commutes home—so why not try them again? You didn't have conclusive evidence that any of these things would work out, but the odds seemed to be in your favor, so you went for it. All of us do similar things—routinely.

We live by faith not only in the small, everyday details of ordinary experience but also in the bigger issues related to religion, God, and eternity. We all adopt “beliefs and actions” related to these areas, “based on something we consider to be trustworthy—even in the absence of absolute proof.” So if you are a Christian, you're trusting in the teachings of Christ;

if a Muslim, you're trusting in the teachings of Muhammad; if a Buddhist, you're trusting in the teachings of Buddha.

Even nonreligious people live in the trust that their nonreligious beliefs are accurate and that they won't someday face a thoroughly religious Maker who, come to find out, actually did issue a list of guidelines and requirements that they failed to pay attention to.

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

Even well-known atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris live their lives accepting an unproven assumption that there is no God and that the opinions they express about these matters are ultimately helping and not harming people. They don't *know* they are correct—they just *believe* and *act* as if they are.

In fact, Dawkins, who is probably the best-known activist for atheism of our day, admitted recently that he was only "6.9 out of seven" in terms of his certainty that there is no God, adding, "I think the probability of a supernatural creator existing is very very low."² Prior to that, in an interview in *Time* magazine, he acknowledged that "there could be something incredibly grand and incomprehensible and beyond our present understanding."

Biochemist Francis Collins, who was arguing in the interview for the other side, 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.”³

Whether the chances are big or small, the important thing to catch here is that Dawkins doesn’t know there is no God—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, and goes on with his routine of belittling people’s belief in God and writing books like *The God Delusion*.

Now, I’m sure Dawkins would argue that his is an educated conclusion that is supported by the preponderance of the evidence. But even if he turned out to be right (I’m betting my life he won’t), it wouldn’t change the fact that his conclusion is a belief that he holds in the absence of real proof. In other words, it’s a conclusion that seems to him to be the right one, based on the data he’s been willing to examine—but one that goes beyond what can be known with certainty.

That’s just the way life is. *We all live by some form of faith—in something*. Which leads us to the central question of this book: 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 and intentionally chosen—or did you just slide into it at some point along the way? Is it a faith about which you can be genuinely confident?



When I went to college, I came to the painful realization that I'd grown into my faith quite passively. I'd been raised believing in Jesus, trusting in the Bible, and accepting that the church was the carrier of God's truth. I had an unsubstantiated confidence in the truth of all of this.

Then I signed up for a philosophy class. My professor, a religious man with a degree from a radically liberal seminary, seemed to delight in dismantling what he considered to be the simplistic beliefs of many of his Christian students—and I felt like one of his favorite targets. He pointed out problems with the Bible, with what he referred to as “traditional views about God,” and with most of the rest of the things I'd been taught. 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. My superficial confidence melted away quickly.

Not knowing how to respond, I went to my church for help—but I have to admit that my initial attempts to get answers from some of the leaders there were pretty disheartening. For example, I told one of my adult Sunday school teachers that my faith was being assailed in college and that I needed a deeper understanding not just of what we believed but also of why we thought it was correct.

“How do we know that the Bible is really true,” I asked, “and that it is actually God's Word?” I'll never forget his response.

“Oh, that's easy,” he replied. “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.”⁴

“Yes, I know that verse . . . but how do we know that what it says is true?” I responded.

“Because it says it is,” he answered, “and it’s the Word of God!”

“But that’s the very question we’re trying to answer,” I shot back. “How do we know it’s really the Word of God? 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 haven’t proved anything.”

He gazed at me with a look that betrayed his suspicion that I was rapidly sinking into the quicksand of skepticism—or had already become an actual infidel—and then, with a deep breath, he took another run at me. “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 is really the one talking here? Lots of religious books claim to be God talking—like the Qur’an, and the Book of Mormon—but you don’t believe those books, do you?”

“Of course not—but that’s because,” he triumphantly retorted, “*those other books are not the Word of God!*”

At this point, I felt like Indiana Jones in that infamous scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where he finally gets fed up with his sword-wielding opponent’s antics and pulls out his pistol and shoots the guy. Of course I’m only kidding (at least now I am)—I would never actually shoot anyone! But it was becoming abundantly clear that logic was not going to get me any further in that conversation. So I finally had to let

it go—although I was left with the same questions churning in my mind.

Soon thereafter, I'm thankful to say, I found some other teachers and books that proved to be much more helpful. I'll come back to my story later, but this exasperating interchange and other similar ones along the way helped me realize that people hold to all kinds of religious ideas—whether right or wrong—for all kinds of weak and apparently unfounded reasons. I determined then and there that regardless of where I ended up with my faith, my conclusions would be based on more solid criteria than that which some of my teachers were apparently clinging to.



A few years ago I 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 lived in the Midwest, where most of my "mountain biking" was really more akin to "*prairie* biking"—without any mountains or even serious hills. At the time I lived in the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains of California, and I decided to finally research and invest in a full-suspension, no-nonsense, bona fide mountain bike. So I subscribed to *Mountain Bike Action* magazine, searched for info 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, aluminum, titanium, and carbon fiber. That last option seemed the

most unlikely choice, at least at first, because I was planning on riding some serious trails—with big rocks, sharp turns, and plenty of drops and obstacles—and entrusting my safety to some kind of newfangled synthetic glass or plastic or whatever it was just didn't seem like a good idea.

But I kept reading and researching, doing Google searches, 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 even lighter than titanium. It's expensive, but it provides a great combination of durability and weight—and it looks awesome, too.

So as you've probably already gathered, I ended up buying a carbon-fiber mountain bike. After months of research, I bought the top frame I could get for the money. I also researched, read reviews, and got expert advice on each of the components to build onto the frame, including the fork, rear shock, crank, derailleurs, shifters, brakes (front and rear hydraulic disc brakes, no less), handlebars, 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 has served me really well, both when I lived in California and now where I reside in the foothills of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. (Honestly, I think it's about the coolest bike on the planet. It ought to be—I paid the price of a motorcycle but got a cycle without the motor. Worse, *I'm* the motor.)

Why do I explain all this? To point out a sobering fact: many of us spend more time researching, discussing, 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, which shrubs or flowers to plant, what university to attend, or (you fill in the blank)—than we do on monumental issues like what we believe about God, how we'll respond to the claims of Jesus and the teachings of the Bible, or where we'll spend eternity. We've got our priorities backward!

Seriously, don't you think it's worth spending some significant time reflecting on your faith? If you're a Christian, I'm optimistic that doing so will enhance and strengthen your beliefs—giving you a more confident faith that will better withstand the challenges of cynical professors, irreligious relatives, and skeptical friends. If you have a different set of beliefs, or no religion at all, then I'm convinced you've got much to gain and little to lose. Regardless of the outcome, energy spent reflecting on these issues will serve to deepen your convictions about what you ultimately put your trust in—and you might discover some exciting truths along the way.

Let me join you. My goal is to help you think through which beliefs about God and your spiritual life are worth hanging on to—that's what we'll discuss in the second section of the book, as we consider what I call "Twenty Arrows of Truth" related to the Christian faith. But before that, in the first section following this introductory chapter, I want to help you consider something most people overlook: *Which approach to deciding what to believe is most helpful?* This is crucial, because the method (or methods) you use in deciding what to believe has a huge bearing on what those beliefs will actually be, as well as how confident you'll feel in holding on

to them. So you owe it to yourself not only to think about where you're putting your faith, but also to step back and *think about how you're thinking about it.*⁵

To illustrate the importance of this, let me go back to my mountain bike example. There were a number of ways I could have chosen my bike. I could have simply said, "It's got to be a red one"—and then gone with the first bike that fit that criterion. But it might have turned out to be a horrible red bike. Or I could have said, "It needs to be made in America"—but there are both good bikes and bad bikes made in the USA, so that approach might have led me in a wrong direction as well. Or I could have decided to pick the bicycle I had the best feelings about, regardless of what the reviewers were saying about that particular model. But I've learned long ago that buying things based on "warm fuzzies" is not a good idea. Instead, I decided to do some real research, looking for objective information from qualified experts who would give unbiased opinions—and the result is that I'm confident I made a good choice.

Can you see how the method we use to make these decisions can impact our confidence in what we actually select? What's true about bikes is true about spiritual beliefs as well.

Most people never consider this. They just arbitrarily adopt an approach—or accept one that's been handed to them—and uncritically employ it to choose a set of beliefs that may or may not really add up. So they end up embracing ideas they haven't carefully examined and which they certainly don't feel ready to defend to others (like me in college). I'm sure you don't want to follow their pattern. That's why we're going to unpack six common approaches, or what

I'll be describing as six "faith paths" people take in order to arrive at their spiritual points of view.

The following section will explain those faith paths in practical terms, one per chapter, and help you weigh some of the pros and cons of each one. Before that, though, let me encourage you to fill out the "Faith Path Questionnaire" in the next chapter. Once you've identified which faith path brought you to where you are today, you'll be ready to figure out how that approach impacts your current beliefs (or lack of beliefs), and what steps will help move you toward greater certainty in your faith. More than that, this process can help you better understand your friends and relatives, and equip you to coach them in how they can clarify their own faith commitments.

Let me encourage you to engage fully in this journey. Yes, it will stretch you to think about things you've probably taken for granted, and it might lead you to rethink some beliefs you've long held to. But it also promises to help you build a strong foundation for your beliefs and, in the end, to enjoy the assurance and benefits that come with having a confident faith.