

"If you're a doubter, welcome to the club. This book will make you laugh, make you cry, and make you think."

MARK BATTERSON, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GOOD-FAITH CONVERSATIONS  
WITH SKEPTICS, ATHEISTS,  
AND THE SPIRITUALLY  
WOUNDED



PRESTON ULMER

If you're a doubter, welcome to the club. This book will make you laugh, make you cry, and make you think. Preston's authenticity is not only endearing; it's enlightening.

MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*, lead pastor of National Community Church

Most Christians think evangelism is about trying to convince nonbelievers to believe what Christians believe. In Western culture, this is painfully awkward and rarely effective, which is why, despite the New Testament's many instructions to spread the Good News, most Christians understandably shy away from it. In *The Doubters' Club*, Preston Ulmer uses compelling stories, insightful biblical teaching, and a healthy dose of refreshingly raw (and, often, comically self-deprecating) honesty to lay out a radically different and much more compelling model of evangelism. Among other things, instead of trying to rescue skeptics from their doubts, Ulmer encourages Christians to simply befriend skeptics *as they are*, which includes affirming and exploring their doubts. Perhaps most importantly, Ulmer is one of those gifted communicators who *inspires* readers at least as much as he informs them. *The Doubters' Club* stirred a fire in me for evangelism that I confess had become rather cool over time. I am confident this book will have a similar effect on most who read it with an open mind, which is why I sincerely hope *The Doubters' Club* finds its way into the hands of a great multitude of Christians.

GREG BOYD, senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church, president of ReKnew.org, author of *Benefit of the Doubt*

*The Doubters' Club* comes at just the right time. We live in a time of political, racial, and ideological division. This book helps us see the image of God in all people, love them for who they are, and listen and lift them up from wherever they are.

WALTER HARVEY, president of the National Black Fellowship

I love both the evangelism and discipleship that is taking place through the Doubters' Club! Preston makes it possible for any of us to live with Christlike love without having to have all the answers. This book is a true north for anyone who wants to have meaningful relationships with doubters and skeptics.

DOUG CLAY, general superintendent of The Assemblies of God

This book is for the cynics, dreamers, hesitant hopefuls, and the ones all too familiar with being shamed for their doubting. Preston Ulmer shares how to move past motivations of evangelical spiritual-trophy collections to genuinely seeing and loving others authentically and naturally. *The Doubters' Club* is simply a stunning display of God's desire to know and love us. Are you doubting? Are you in need of a fresh perspective on how to love others as they are? Are you hopeful for unity in relationships that seem to get stuck over arguments and petty disagreements? This book is for you.

CANDACE PAYNE (CHEWBACCA MOM), author, speaker,  
viral sensation

Preston is a practitioner of what is presented in *The Doubters' Club*. His writing stirs my confidence that in an increasingly skeptical world, the gospel is and always will be good news for the curious and not-yet-convinced. Preston solidifies the truth that guided wrestling with faith questions, concerns, and doubts does not have to cause someone to drift away from Christ—in fact, it might cause them to drift toward him. I highly recommend this book!

JEFFERY PORTMANN, director of the Church Multiplication Network

I have been inspired by the life and ministry of Preston Ulmer for years now, and I am so thankful that he is putting the brilliance of the *Doubters' Club* into book form. This resource will not only help doubters find faith in Christ but also help Christians to create healthy environments for doubters to wrestle with their beliefs. This book will help the church truly be the church. I highly recommend this book and look forward to the lives that will be transformed because of it.

DR. AARON BURKE, pastor of Radiant Church

The *Doubters' Club* exists for the curious at heart. It forms a bridge that can connect people with different worldviews in a safe and honoring space. It is a comforting reminder that we are more than allowed to ask questions.

HOLLYN, American singer and songwriter

Preston Ulmer officially joins the ranks of historic Christian writers such as C. S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther, and Charles Spurgeon, all of whom in like manner laid bare their own doubter's souls. It takes audacity to display your uncertainties, but Preston Ulmer sees the future and how evangelism will play out in the days ahead. Through masterful storytelling and a strong dose of academic rigor, Preston dispels the myth that our doubts need to remain secret and undisclosed. Instead, *The Doubters' Club* will show you how to leverage your doubts toward a life of conviction and influence.

DR. SCOTT HAGAN, author, president of North Central University

*The Doubters' Club* welcomes people across dividing lines to explore genuine conversations about life, faith, and purpose. Read this book with your friends, and join the conversation!

DR. DAVID DOCUSEN, author of *Neighborliness: Finding the Beauty of God across Dividing Lines*

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WOUNDED



PRESTON ULMER

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*The Doubters' Club: Good-Faith Conversations with Skeptics, Atheists, and the Spiritually Wounded*

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*For my wife, Lisa.*

*You believed in me when I didn't believe in God.*

*The one thing I have never doubted is your love for me.*





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# INTRODUCTION

## *Great Minds Do Not Think Alike*

*Whether the questions are old or new—or angry varieties of either—we should be more engaging and less confrontational in our sharing of the good news. We must find new hinges upon which to swing open new doors.*

RANDY NEWMAN, *Questioning Evangelism*

IN 1618, playwright Dabridgcourt Belchier expressed an idea that has outlived the ancient English of its time: “Good wits doe jumpe,”<sup>1</sup> by which he meant what has become a cliché: “Great minds think alike.” Since then, we have been playfully commending one another for sharing our thoughts and our opinions. I would dare say that celebrating the person who thinks and believes like us is far older than the seventeenth century.

The ironic part of it all is that every one of us thinks we are right.

When I was in seminary, I heard a quote that shared a similar idea. With conviction, my professor would often quote a famous philosopher by saying: “What monstrosities

would walk the streets were some people's faces as unfinished as their minds?"<sup>2</sup> The quote is a profound way of saying, "If you aren't certain about everything you believe, you're a monster."

After two master's degrees, years of pastoral ministry, and years of being an Uber driver, I couldn't disagree more. People who think about the complexities of life and are perplexed by belief in God are not "monsters." Most people approach those who think differently than them with anxiety, frustration, and resistance. Dismissive of their views. Discouraged by their lack of faith. We have been trained by the cultural cliché that "great minds think alike." We use this sort of rhetoric when it comes to categories like sports and our favorite restaurants . . . and we apply it by refusing to genuinely connect with the person we are inwardly condemning—mostly because connection and condemnation can't share the same space.

In every society there have always been people who are committed to connection in spite of differences. Poets, artists, and TED Talks teach us that great minds do not think alike! The people of the ancient Near East saw the mind as the seat of the emotions. It was, what we call in American culture, the heart. Great hearts feel differently. They process, think, remember, bleed, and heal in a multitude of ways. Jesus never calls those unlike him monsters for their unbelief. He brought unbelievers and religious Pharisees together to help them move toward the Father. Together.

His tactics were different than ours. Jesus had a way of

making the supposed “monsters” look beautiful. Few people have written about this as accurately as Flannery O’ Connor. In her short story “Revelation,” Ruby Turpin is a legalistic woman likened to a bigot of the worse kind. Amid her self-righteous posture is her unrelenting judgment toward those who need even the slightest dose of conventional grace. As the story develops, however, her final epiphany is an emotionally hazardous one. She has a mystical vision of bridges and pathways to heaven. Reuniting the saved and the damned, O’ Connor writes:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven . . . [along with] battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. . . . She recognized at once . . . those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . . Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.<sup>3</sup>

What a satirical representation of Jesus’ heart. The freaks and lunatics are the most desperate to become the free and lovely. They are more eager to get in. “Even the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the Kingdom before you” (Matthew 21:31, author’s paraphrase). Jesus had a way of

holding ground for those who would be considered doubters and skeptics.

He was persuasive, not argumentative.

Curious, not critical.

Careful, not crushing.

Asked, but didn't assume.

Connected before he corrected.

Jesus was not the loudest proclaimer of what he believed to be true, but he was the busiest doer of what he knew to be love.

This is the driving force of the book. Whom Jesus loved, how Jesus loved them, and why it is still the most effective way to make disciples. My atheist friend, Sam, said it best: "The Christians who come to the Doubters' Clubs aren't Christians. They are Jesus people." I'm proud to admit we look more like freaks and lunatics than we do Mrs. Turpins.

The Doubters' Club was birthed when I asked an atheist coffee-shop owner what type of church he would go to. You can try to be as winsome as possible, but some questions are just bizarre. This was one of those questions. Taken off guard, he responded with, "I don't go to church. I'm an atheist."

"Oh, I used to not believe in all this either!" I genuinely felt a connection. "But if you *did* go to church, what type of church would you go to?"

I wasn't interested in converting him. My family would be moving to Denver soon to start a fresh expression of Jesus, and I had no idea where to start. I was merely asking a local for advice.

“Okay . . . *if* I went to church, I would go somewhere where I could ask questions and I wasn’t judged for thinking differently.”

What an incredible answer! My new friend would go somewhere as long as he was able to think for himself. Months later, we started the Doubters’ Club together. Doubters’ Clubs are gatherings led by a Christian and a non-Christian who model friendship and pursue truth together. It is not an apologetics ministry. It is a club for the “monsters.” Great minds don’t think alike at the Doubters’ Club.

This book is not my plan for franchising the Doubters’ Club. I realize it’s not for everyone. The purpose of the next nine chapters is to show that the Doubters’ Club isn’t a new thing to do. It’s a new way to do everything. It is a lifestyle that builds bridges where there used to be barriers and sets us free from “closing the deal” every time we converse with people who do not think like us. In fact, making disciples isn’t getting people to think like us at all. Thinking like us may be the barrier, not the bridge.

My prayer is that each chapter is a grace of God to you. A means of renewing your mind. To borrow a phrase from my friend Greg Boyd: “Rethink everything you thought you knew.”<sup>4</sup> I have a hunch that current practices of evangelism leave you feeling frustrated and defeated, and I am confident that they are off-putting to our unbelieving brothers and sisters. Fixing these practices is certainly killing us. I’m writing this with nonbelievers in mind. So, for the sake of their salvation and your freedom, would you accept my invitation



into the Doubters' Club? If you already have objections and questions about some of the things I have said—perfect! That means we don't think like one another, and it's going to be a great meeting. Grab a drink.

Let's pursue truth together, my friend.

# 1

## GOD OF THE DOUBTER

*Out of the Faith, into the Kingdom*

*Loss is like a wind, it either carries you to a new destination  
or it traps you in an ocean of stagnation. You must quickly  
learn how to navigate the sail, for stagnation is death.*

VAL UCHENDU

*So, you're telling me there's a chance?*

LLOYD CHRISTMAS, *Dumb and Dumber*

THE FIRST TIME I SAW *DUMB AND DUMBER*, I was reduced to a dribbling, hysterical wreck. I don't remember the where, when, or who I was with, but I can recall most of the lines. I learned that "you can't triple stamp a double stamp," and there is no use in arguing over it. I also learned that traveling four inches, according to the map, is incredibly disappointing on a road trip. Jim Carey and Jeff Daniels had a way of tossing my intellectual pretensions out the window for an hour and forty-seven minutes and filling my brain with laugh-worthy quotes. Among all the lines, there is an

iconic scene between Jim Carey's character, Lloyd Christmas, and his love interest, Mary Swanson. It has since become a classic moment in American cinematography.

Lloyd finds that he is in love with Mary, who is part of a scheme that he is trying to rescue her from. In one moment, they are alone together, and he says to her:

“What do you think the chances are of a guy like you and a girl like me . . . ending up together?” . . .

“Not good,” she says.

Lloyd persists. “You mean . . . not good like one out of a hundred?”

She says, “I'd say more like one out of a million.”

After a long pause Lloyd's countenance is lifted as he sees the silver lining in it all. With newfound confidence he says that classic line: “So, you're telling me there's a chance?”

If you have ever known someone who was once a Christian but has since become a skeptic or doubter, it can often feel like Lloyd had a better chance at taking Mary out than they have at returning to Jesus. They have just enough questions to sink the ship they used to sail and just enough Bible knowledge to poke holes in yours. Honestly, it can be a frightening thing. These people are famously identified as “nones.” No affiliation with religious beliefs or practices. In October of 2020, there was a post on the *Religion in Public* blog by Professors Paul Djupe and Ryan Burge. As they continue to research the decline of religion, they stated that “the most momentous change in American religion over the last

25 years has been the growth of the religious nones from 5 percent in 1994 to 34 percent in 2019.”<sup>1</sup>

Author John S. Dickerson saw a growing number of nones back in 2013. According to Dickerson’s book *The Great Evangelical Recession*, reports were showing an increase in the amount of people who would not consider themselves religious. And an even larger number of people than ever who are abandoning the faith.

“The natural, fear-based reaction to these changes,” Dickerson writes, “is to raise our guard and fight for our rights.”<sup>2</sup> Based on the statistics, it’s safe to say fear-based reactions are not winning others over. It’s time we respond, not react.

Most of us are connected to someone who falls into one of these statistics: the not religious or the ones who have abandoned the faith altogether. Please do not lose heart! Believe it or not, stepping away from a faith that they do not sincerely hold to is the right move to make. I was once a spiritual seeker, doubter, and abandoner of the faith. Let me tell you what drew me back into the Christian faith.

It was a person, not a program.

A detour, not a destination.

A commitment, not a conversion.

A patience, not a prayer.

Perhaps most revolutionary of them all, it was someone who led with their weakness, not their strength.

I’m saying there’s still a chance!

## How I Defied the Odds

When I was in Bible college, I started to have doubts about the faith. It doesn't happen to everyone, but I can recall exactly where I was when it started. I was flying to New Mexico after speaking at a youth event in Arkansas. I used to always sit in the window seat, put on my headphones, look out the window, and pray. Add pretzels and cranberry juice to the mix and it was, for all intents and purposes, Communion with Christ. So I boarded the plane, pressed *play* on my iPod, looked out the window, and felt . . . nothing. For the first time, my thoughts about God were not comforting. If anything, they were working against me.

*Why didn't God heal the youth pastor I prayed for yesterday?  
Do I even believe the message I spoke?*

*How stupid am I? Staring out the window, praying to an invisible God.*

To say they snowballed is an understatement. Over the next few weeks, I was waking up with more questions. Some historical. Some existential. But all of them unwanted. They trespassed on every positive experience I ever had with God. When I would think about youth camps, I wouldn't remember being called to ministry by the presence of God; I would dwell on the manipulative rhetoric the preacher used. I wasn't called. I was coerced. Going to church became altogether weird. Praise and worship were no longer a time to sing the borrowed prayers of our brothers and sisters. Instead, I observed my friends go into a trance from some Christian

version of karaoke. They weren't worshipping. They were brainwashed.

And worst of all was when I was alone. At least in public my doubts were tempered by all the distractions and authentic friendships. When I was alone, I had no hope of recovering. I was leaving the faith one day at a time. It started with not feeling the presence of God, and it progressively turned into not believing there is a presence to be felt. Doubts turned into depression, and depression made me desperate. As you are about to see, I was willing to try just about anything to make my questions go away.

When my pastor found out I was doubting, he called me in his office after service. His office smelled like coffee. The couches were well-kept, and the books aligned on the bookshelf perfectly. It was the type of office that made you address him as Pastor. Even if you would normally be on a first-name basis, not in his office.

"Preston, sit right here." He motioned for some of the available staff to come in.

"Close the door," he said as he laid his hand on my shoulder.

Giving the staff the CliffsNotes version of my struggle was all they needed. They had a second service to get to, after all. The pastor conveyed to them that the enemy of my soul was attacking my belief in God because I was doubting the faith and experiencing bouts of depression. Then they tried to cast out any demon of doubt, followed by telling me to listen to more worship music and sleep on the Bible. You heard

that right, they told me to *sleep on the Bible*. Apparently, it was supposed to work like osmosis. “Keep your mind pure,” they said. And since I was desperate, I tried all those things.

Maybe it was because I slept on the wrong Bible translation, but as you can imagine, none of it worked. I went from doubting, to depressed, to desperate, to thoroughly disappointed. Disappointed because my suspicions were confirmed. If God wasn't willing to show up when I really needed him, maybe it's because he can't show up. Maybe it's because he is not real.

To be clear, I wasn't just wondering about the existence of God. My understanding of faith and life was breaking down, which eventually deconstructed my entire worldview.

Following my failed deliverance, I went to a doctor. Perhaps something was off with my hormones. Maybe I don't have the capacity to think straight. Maybe I'm sick. I told the doctor about the crazy thoughts I was having and how it was causing me to stay in bed well past noon.

“It's not situational depression,” I told him. “There isn't really anything for me to be depressed about.”

It felt more permanent than that. I remember even telling the doctor to find something wrong with me. I needed a pill to make my pain go away.

After the blood results came in, the doctor told me that all my levels were fine. This is the report that most people want to hear from the doctor, but not me. All this meant was that I was responsible for handling my doubts and depression. There was no way out other than admitting that they were

valid and welcoming them in. I thought the day I invited Jesus into my heart, he would protect me from all the intruders who would come barging in. Apparently, he wasn't in there anymore. Doubt and depression made themselves right at home. At this point, I would have taken either: a pill or a Savior.

The summer was coming to an end, and I knew I couldn't go back to Bible college. But I wanted something to show for my time there. I needed to go back to at least finish my associate's degree. The problem was, I was supposed to be the head resident assistant of a dorm. Imagine that! A doubting spiritual leader praying for you, planning devotionals, and talking theology.

I emailed the resident director to let her know what I was going through. To address the depression, she encouraged me by quoting Scripture and speaking to the potential she saw in my life. As far as the doubting went, not much was said about it, but she did want me to return to the college. I wasn't sure what type of train wreck was ahead, but the conductor gave me the thumbs up, and I needed a degree. I was shy about my unbelief because I knew it wouldn't go over well.

The next part of my journey is a game changer. To quote writer and philosopher Albert Camus: "In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."<sup>3</sup> I'm always hesitant to share it for a few reasons. First, some people find divine encounters off-putting, and it ends up discrediting the entire story. If that's you, just remember that I'm naturally very skeptical of supernatural



claims, and I totally understand your suspicion. After all, I am the one who started something called “The Doubters’ Club.” Second, divine encounters are not regular pit stops on our detour away from God. I can’t say this will happen to everyone, but it happened to me. All I can say is that authenticity before God was the only option I had left.

I arrived at the dorms in the afternoon and was supposed to be leading a meeting within the hour. Exhausted after bringing in my luggage, I slumped down onto the futon and wept. I was tired of fighting for something I didn’t believe in with someone who wasn’t there. I didn’t know how this was going to look for the next academic year, but none of the outcomes seemed promising. I was a doubter at a Bible college who didn’t believe in the Bible. Sick and tired of everything “Christian,” here is all I had to say to God:

“God, if you are up there and you don’t do something now, I will never come back to you.”

It wasn’t an ultimatum. That’s what you do when you are playing religion and trying to twist God’s arm—you give him an ultimatum. This was authentic. This is what one lover says to another when they are tired of the way the other is acting in the relationship. Like a forsaken lover, I cried for what felt like hours. In fact, I cried myself to sleep and missed the meeting entirely.

When I finally woke up, it was three hours later. It’s hard to explain how I felt upon waking up that afternoon. Typically, naps help you feel refreshed. This must have

been more than a nap because I wasn't just refreshed; I felt renewed. It was a similar sensation to the one you get when you wake up from a nightmare only to realize it was merely a bad dream or the relief that sweeps through your body when you know that your thoughts were not your own and that what is real is better than what you dreamt of. It was like that. Instead of an alarm waking me up, however, it felt like love pouring around me, in me, through me, and for me. I was in love with whatever was visiting my spirit, and it was in love with me.

Looking back, it is similar to when Jesus turned the dirty, foot-washing water into wine at the wedding. The moment he touched the water, it blushed. I was blushing before God in that dorm room. I was embarrassed and invigorated at the same time. Totally embarrassed by my unbelief but invigorated by the acceptance I was experiencing. Even as I write this, it is difficult to say whether that was the day I entered the Kingdom of God again, or the day I crashed into it. C. S. Lewis said he went kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of God, "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England."<sup>4</sup> I think I woke up in the Kingdom of God. The most renewed convert in all of Texas.

That experience marked me. I realized that day there is something outside of myself that is wanting to interact with me; and the key to that interaction is not suppressing my doubts, but regarding them as the means to an authentic relationship with whatever it was that woke me up. I did not know at the time that it was Jesus, since the Jesus I was crying

out to never answered my prayers. That Jesus died over two thousand years ago, and dead people don't come back to life. Plus, that Jesus rebuked doubters for their unbelief. Or so I thought.

A few days later, a professor of philosophy and apologetics heard about the summer I had had. At the time, I didn't know what apologetics even was. He asked me if he could walk with me through my questions and doubts during some of his office hours.

"Sure." Anything is better than sleeping on the Bible.

Then he said something that indicated he truly cared about me. "I don't care where you land, as long as you're honest. You don't have to end up thinking like me." That conversation began a journey that led to my life's work.

## **Thinking Differently in the Same Kingdom**

To get where we haven't been before, we have to be willing to do what we haven't done before. We have prayed. We have learned apologetics. We have debated, persuaded, and manipulated. What haven't we done? We haven't given the people who doubt Christianity the right to leave *our* version of faith so that they may enter the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps you think the only way in is through the front door as you experienced it.

A service.

A prayer.

A confession.

These methods are making the odds of doubters following Jesus go down, not up. Moreover, did Jesus speak of the Kingdom of God like this? He spoke of it as a reality that exists inside us (Luke 17:21; see ESV note). It is the eternal spiritual reality where God eternally reigns and by which we experience his presence and reign here on earth. If the Kingdom of God is within you, you should leave a little bit of heaven everywhere you go. And I think that is our new strategy. Go to heavenless places and leave a trail of evidence for the doubter. Not through argumentation (sometimes that feels more like hell), but rather by demonstrating that life in Christ is not necessarily thinking like us; it is thinking with us. We are all doubters on a journey to the front door. Doubts, not answers, might be our common ground with the unbeliever.

This understanding led me to start the Doubters' Club. The goal has remained the same since its inception, and it's simple:

*Model friendship with people who  
think differently and pursue truth together.*

Period. There is no praying for one another or liturgical/structured reading of sacred texts. The whole meeting exists for the people who are not spiritually curious enough to attend church. It is a meeting where Jesus can be brought into conversation without the condemnation they may feel

from religion. The goal is not for me to win and them to lose. In fact, to lose a relationship with them is to altogether lose. During the meeting, we talk about whatever topic the group voted on the time before. The topics have ranged from sexuality to the violence of the Old Testament. One time we even talked about whether artificial intelligence will ever have a soul. (I needed a lot of coffee for that meeting.)

Below is the agenda for how we hold a Doubters' Club meeting:

Step 1. We go over our five ground rules so we can have a respectful discussion:

1. We value respect above being right.
2. We listen without interrupting.
3. We are a safe place.
4. We listen with an open mind.
5. We understand and accept differences of opinion.

Step 2. A Christian and an unbeliever talk back and forth about the issue at hand for about ten to fifteen minutes. Since its inception in 2015, we have launched multiple Doubters' Clubs. Some have Christians and universalists. Others have Christians and agnostics. Others have Christians and Jews. To maintain the integrity of the meeting, it doesn't need to have a Christian and an atheist. It just has to be two people who don't think alike.

Remember, we are modeling friendship with people who think differently.

Step 3. After discussion between the two moderators has generated some ideas and brought levity to the room, the topic is opened up for discussion for the next hour. This is when people from all backgrounds and belief systems start sharing their thoughts, asking questions, and building genuine interest in one another. Remember, we are pursuing truth together.

Step 4. Then, we vote on the next month's topic. Attendees offer suggestions for the next discussion topic, then vote by raising their hand when the moderator reads their favorite option. (Imagine an unchurched congregation picking the sermon series.)

The Doubters' Club is a dialogical setting where even people who hate God are welcome to come and air their grievances. Many times, the faith they have walked away from is itself a departure from historic, biblically informed Christianity. It's a faith that is not at all coherent with the world around them. It's not consistent in what it claims. And it doesn't cooperate with someone who thinks differently than them. They have to walk away from that faith if they are going to have any chance of coming into the Kingdom of God. In all honesty, so many of them are part of the Kingdom already. The only difference is that they are still wrestling with God on a few issues that the

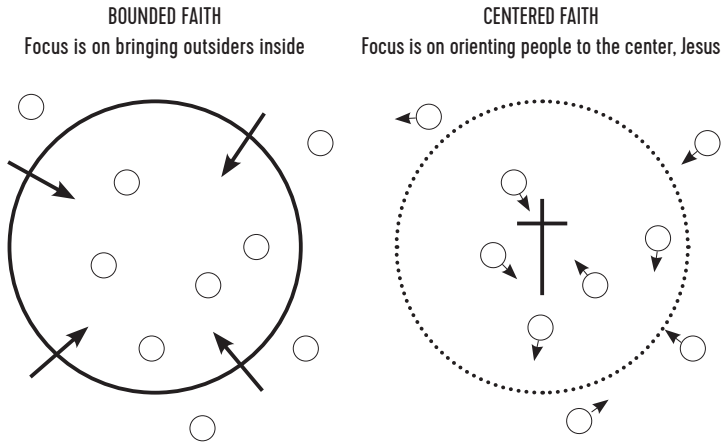
fundamentalist believer seems to have absolute certainty on. They think differently, but the Kingdom is in them. As they discover truth, the closer they come to truth, the closer they come to God.

In their timely book *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch give a helpful illustration here. They make the distinction between fences and wells. Most of evangelical thought about the Kingdom of God is in terms of fences.

“In some farming communities, the farmers might build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of other farms out. This is a bounded set.”<sup>5</sup> That is, it keeps track of who’s in and who’s out. Religions do this in a variety of ways. Church membership rosters are an obvious one. Contrary to a bounded set, a more Christ-centered way of thinking about the Kingdom is by picturing a rural community where farms and ranches cover an enormous geographical location. The area is so vast that fences are out of the question.

Under these conditions a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply. . . . It is assumed that livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well, lest they die. This is a centered set. As long as there remains clean water, the livestock will remain close by.<sup>6</sup>

The diagram below visually illustrates what Hirsch and Frost refer to as the center versus bounded set.



Rather than seeing people as *in* or *out*, what if we started seeing people by their degree of distance from Jesus?

There is a story in the New Testament about a man named Zacchaeus who persisted to see Jesus even though the crowd was boxing him out.

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

LUKE 19:1-4, MSG



When Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus, Scripture tells us that the religious followers were blocking his view. Human fences, if you will. The “wee little man” (sing along if you know it) had to climb a sycamore tree to get a clear view of Jesus. Perhaps our dogmatic approaches to who’s in and who’s out are obstructing people’s view of Jesus. Instead of obstructing people’s view, we need to be sycamore-tree planters. We need to be well diggers. We need more spaces like the Doubters’ Club. You can be that space.

### **Being the Kingdom to All**

Jesus shows us the way to become a safe space to all the doubters who are walking away from faith in him. In Jesus’ day, Jerusalem was the place of faith. The psalmist spoke of it often as a place that got special attention from God. “The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel” (Psalm 147:2, NIV). The story is told of two disciples who were returning home after attending Passover in Jerusalem. Journeying away from their faith, these disciples were doubting, depressed, and absolutely disappointed.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself

came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

LUKE 24:13-16, NIV

Walking away from faith, they are now bumping into the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus walks along with them as they continue to move away from the place of the Resurrection. Commentaries tell us that these two would have had to be disheartened and full of disbelief about who Jesus claimed to be.<sup>7</sup> Since Luke frequently reported Jesus heading toward Jerusalem and his mission on the cross, he likely intended there to be a stark contrast here. These two are heading in the opposite direction of Jesus and the fulfillment of his mission. The story continues as Jesus asks them what they were discussing.

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

LUKE 24:17-24, NIV

Is this not the case for our doubting brothers and sisters? Or perhaps for ourselves as the doubters in the story. We are all surrounded by companions who seem to have a more robust belief than we do, filled with stories of visions and experiences. Maybe together we would be able to discern the presence of Christ among us. Maybe that's the point. That no doubter is left alone to their questions and disappointments. We are to walk alongside them, slightly confused ourselves. All the while, looking to recognize the Kingdom of God with us the whole time.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

LUKE 24:30-32, NIV

These not-yet Christians were walking away from the Resurrection only to experience the Kingdom of God in the flesh. But did you notice? It was a slow heart that burned within. With each step, Jesus was by their side and the embers of their hearts grew brighter and brighter. I can just imagine one of them asking the other, “Does your heart burn, too? Jesus was walking with us this whole time! We thought it was over, but it has only just begun.”

It is important that we are willing to be the companion who journeys with our doubting friends, recognizing Christ among us and acknowledging his love within us.

### **Invite Them to the Table**

The remainder of the book has practical steps you can take to make the Doubters’ Club a lifestyle. To get there, however, you have to be willing to say yes to a question:

*Would you be willing to start breaking bread  
with the people Jesus broke bread with?*

Can you grab coffee with the person you would normally condemn? The people he invited to the table were far from churchgoers. They were religious outcasts. Jesus spent so much time with them he was often thrown in the same category as they were. “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Luke 7:34).

It gets worse. Not only will reaching the doubter compromise your reputation, you may never see them decide to follow Jesus. Remember Judas? He received an invitation to the table even though Jesus knew how Judas's story was going to end.

Forget doubter—Judas was a traitor invited to the Lord's table. The lost cause of the bunch who had ulterior motives in the relationship. If you say yes to this new way of living like Jesus, you will be saying yes to being ridiculed by the religious and rejected by some you invest a lot of time into. But don't lose heart; this is good news! For I know the depths Jesus had to go to reach me, and I have lost count of the times I have betrayed him. To be like Jesus to the doubter, it is helpful to remember the daily invitation he offers to each one of us:

*Even if you betray me tomorrow,  
will you partake of me today?*