



Preface

I well remember living much of the first two decades of my life in a spiritual fog. It wasn't that I was an 'unbeliever'; I just didn't know what I believed. And such experience as I had of church and Christians, and such exposure as I had to the message of the Bible, had not yet shed sufficient light on my path to pierce through that fog.

But during my time at university some of that fog lifted as I met Christians who, by the lives they lived and by the teaching they gave, opened me up to listen and to understand 'what Christians believe'. In the decade that followed, during which I studied law and practised with a City of London law firm, these Christian convictions strengthened.

In the two decades since then as a church minister, first and briefly in Sydney, Australia, and then at St John's in Downshire Hill in London, I have played a part in helping others out of that same kind of spiritual fog that I experienced. And where individuals have been helped, it has been through that same combination of lives





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lived in a God-honouring way and clear teaching about 'what Christians believe'. The first of these 'helps' – the attractiveness of Christians' lives – cannot be presented on a printed page, but you may know of Christians whose lives inspire you to know what inspires them. The second of these 'helps', the clear presentation of what Christians believe, I have tried to provide through a short course originally held over four evenings. The content of that short course forms the basis of what you hold in your hands now.

We begin by looking at what God is like, and why God has made us (ch. 1). We go on to look at some common mistakes we tend to make about God and how to relate to God (ch. 2). We then look at the person of Jesus and what is claimed by him and for him (ch. 3). We also consider, in chapter 4, how matters of 'faith' relate to matters of 'fact'. At the centre of the course, and of this book, are the twin questions of 'What's gone wrong with the world?' (ch. 5) and 'Does God care?' (ch. 6). Then, on the central issue 'How can I know God?' we listen first to one of the Bible's own talks, given by an early preacher (ch. 7) and second to Jesus in conversation with a man called Nicodemus (ch. 8). Finally, chapter 9 is the story of one man who received new life from Christ. I include this to show that the message of this book, like the message of the Bible, is not just information, it is an invitation.

It *is* information about the God the Bible tells us is there. But more than that, it is an *invitation* to submit to that God, and receive with joy the new life he gives. This book is likely to be most useful to you if you are able to read it with the attitude, 'God, if you are there and if you have things to say to me, help me to hear them and respond in the way you desire.'





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You may read this book as a Christian wanting a refresher course. Or you may read this as someone who is interested without necessarily regarding yourself as committed. If either of these describes you, I have written with you in mind.

I should add there are two assumptions underlying all that follows. The first is that we discover what Christians believe by understanding another book – or collection of books – which is the Bible. And therefore each chapter is an attempt to clarify a key aspect of what Christians believe by looking at a passage of the Bible. There are, of course, other ways of ascertaining what Christians believe; one would be to ask Christians today what they believe, and another would be to read the published works of Christians of previous generations. But both those ways of investigating Christian belief would take you beyond themselves to the source of authority for what they believe – the Bible. I am seeking to go straight to that authoritative source for a quick and sure answer to what Christians believe – a source which you can check for yourself.

The second assumption I am making is that the Bible is reliable in all that it teaches. Except for a short postscript, no attempt is made to defend its reliability. In my experience the issue of the Bible's reliability can detain too many for too long. Scrutinizing the messenger delays the process of listening to the message and in practice many of us never get to listen to the message because, we think, we are not sure about the messenger. But this is an unnecessary delay. If there is indeed such a God as Christians believe, who has indeed caused the Bible to be written by the hands of many human authors, is that same God not well able to convince us of the Bible's truthfulness as we read?



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If in the end we are not convinced by the message, it is illogical and improbable to suppose that any human argument or further evidence for the divine inspiration of these Scriptures will convince us.

One potential problem in what follows is that you will not get the opportunity to ask the questions on your mind as you would if we walked and talked together. It is not a total solution, but at the close of each chapter, and based on the questions frequently asked on the course, I am going to imagine two characters called 'Jack' and 'Jill' asking the kind of questions you might voice. Though better known for 'going up a hill to fetch a pail of water', I hope Jack and Jill can serve a useful purpose in asking (some of) your questions and relaying to you some of my answers.

