

Chapter One



**Why Should I
Trust Jesus** When

There Are So
Many **Other**
Spiritual Paths?



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*“Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the
ancient paths, ask where the good way is,
and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

—Jeremiah 6:16

Oak Hill Academy, set in the heart of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains on the southwestern border of Virginia, is nationally known for being a basketball powerhouse. It has won national championships and produced all-Americans such as Carmelo Anthony. At the age of eighteen, I headed there for my last year of high school with the sole intention of playing basketball with the best and the brightest young stars. My coach, Steve Smith, was a four-time *USA Today* High School Coach of the Year. My team and I traveled to Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Las Vegas, and competed in exciting matchups against some of the most talented teams across the country.

Little did I know that God was going to teach me greater lessons that year than those I learned on the basketball court (and on the bench, which I often kept warm!). While I had expected to battle rival teams on the basketball court, I had no idea that the biggest battle would be the one for my faith.

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At this Christian boarding school, I was required to attend chapel during the week as well as church on Sunday morning. One day in chapel, the pastor prayed something like this: “Dear God, some of us call you Father or Jesus, some of us call you Allah, some of us call you other names, but we know that you are the same God of us all—a God of love.” Throughout the year, the pastor continued to pray similar prayers.

Many people didn’t think anything was wrong with praying such an “inclusive” prayer. In fact, I truly believe that my pastor had a genuine heart of love for the student body. He was attempting to welcome students with a diverse range of spiritual beliefs. Some of the students of other faiths included my Muslim friends from Egypt as well as my buddy from Senegal, with whom I normally ate lunch. But the implication of my pastor’s prayers and teaching was an attack on the religious exclusivism to which I held (more on that below).

Even though I had some good friends at Oak Hill, I felt alone at times. My beliefs were not always popular on campus. Most of my peers and even some of my teachers considered me narrow-minded and judgmental for believing that Christianity is exclusively true. Although I lived far away from my family and church, I realized that my pastor’s prayer was contrary to what the early historical church believed about Jesus Christ: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”¹ I knew that Jesus Himself claimed religious exclusivity when He said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”²

What I experienced as an eighteen-year-old at Oak Hill Academy is not unusual for many young Christians. In fact, today, if you claim that your religion is exclusively true, you are often regarded as an intolerant, narrow-minded, bigoted extremist. And many people don’t know how to respond when their claims about Christ are attacked. As a result, they’re walking away from *believing* and *trusting* the historic Christ of the Bible.

When my pastor prayed, “Dear God, some of us call you Father

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or Jesus, some of us call you Allah,” etc., I did not know exactly what to do, but I knew I had to do something. I knew that his prayer was contrary to the Bible, so I started praying that God would use me to change the situation. I wanted to be spiritually prepared; I was not going to be popular claiming that Jesus Christ was “*the way, the truth and the life.*”

As I continued to pray, I felt compelled to ask the pastor if he would allow me to preach for him some Sunday morning in church. Before this, I didn’t have a strong desire to speak or teach, but I became convinced that the student body needed to hear the truth and love of Jesus Christ. To my surprise the pastor said, “Yes!”

I felt convinced that if someone discovered a cure for cancer, he should share that information with others to help those who are dying from cancer. As human beings we have something worse than cancer, called sin. We have proven ourselves to be selfish, prideful, and sometimes hateful. But God gave us the cure for sin through the person of Jesus Christ. Because of God’s extravagant love, I was convinced that the student body needed to hear the truth about His love and mercy. So I called my dad, who is a minister, and asked him if he could help me prepare the outline of a message. I started preparing.

One day, as I was praying, I felt led by the Lord to go to talk to a particular student named Chase. I didn’t know why God wanted me to go to Chase’s room, but I thought that maybe God would use me to tell him about Jesus. So I showed up at his dorm and introduced myself. Chase recognized who I was. I guess I stood out on campus because I am six feet seven inches tall. As Chase and I talked, I mentioned something about spirituality to see how he would react. To my surprise, Chase told me that he was a Christian. We were both excited, because we didn’t know many students who would talk openly about being a Christian. I suggested to Chase that we have a Bible study, and he agreed. However, we both had a lot of homework so we decided to meet another time.

As I made my way back to my dorm, I was overcome with a sense of urgency to do something. I felt that God was leading me to

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go back to Chase's dorm immediately and have a Bible study. I had no idea how to lead a Bible study, so I grabbed my sermon notes that I was working on and took them back to Chase's room. I said, "Chase, I know this seems weird, but I believe that God wants us to have a Bible study right now, even though we both have a lot of homework. I don't know how to lead a Bible study, but I am actually working on my first sermon and am a little nervous about public speaking, so I thought I could practice it for you. You could critique me, and then we could pray."

Chase said, "Go ahead; let's do it."

I asked Chase's roommate, Ethan, to join us, and even though it was a little awkward, I started preaching to the two of them. I gave a simple sermon, similar to the style of Billy Graham, on John 3:16 (NKJV): "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." At the end of my message, I practiced giving an invitation for anyone in the audience who wanted to accept Christ.

When I was finished, Ethan said, "That's really good. When you give that message at church, I am going to pray to receive Christ."

I looked at him, a little astonished, and said, "You can pray to *trust Jesus* as your Savior right now." I said a prayer out loud, and he repeated it as he prayed to trust Jesus.

As we finished praying, a couple of guys walked by the room. They seemed surprised to see me there. They asked what we were doing. I said, "Guys, we're having a Bible study. Come on in!" I gave the same message on John 3:16 to them, and when I was done, one of the guys said, "Dave, that makes sense. I need to believe in Jesus." Once again, I led this student in a simple prayer for him to trust in Christ. I told these guys to come back the next day and bring some friends. When I arrived the next day, there were several new people in the room, and as I practiced the same sermon, two more young men prayed to receive Christ.

I announced to the group that we needed to start a weekly Bible study and asked them to bring some more friends the next week.

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That night, I set an important goal for myself: to personally tell every single student on that campus about Christ. On one occasion, I was having a conversation with a friend of mine in the library who was an outspoken lesbian. I shared with her about the love of God through Christ. She started weeping when I started telling her how much God loved her. I was a little shocked at the sight of her tears, because I didn't think I said anything offensive. She shared with me how much she was hurting on the inside and that she became convicted of her sin and wanted to receive the love of Christ.

The group grew, and people started coming who I didn't expect. A couple of my Muslim friends showed up, one guy who claimed to be a Satanist dropped by, and others who were agnostics and atheists attended, too. We had a question-and-answer time after each session, and some people started to ask tough questions. They asked about the truth of the Bible, about other religions, about salvation by grace (as opposed to salvation by works), and about religious exclusivity. These were hard questions, and I didn't have all of the answers.

Weeks later, I preached at the church, and people responded very positively to the good news of salvation through Jesus. Even the pastor was encouraging of my message. Doors started opening for me to speak at other small churches in the area, and people also started asking more questions about Christianity.

Again, I didn't know all of the answers. Even though it was exciting at times to see people become interested in Jesus, it was not always easy. In fact, sometimes it got downright discouraging, because some of the people that prayed to "trust Jesus" ended up walking away from Christianity and some people stopped coming to Bible study.

As I struggled with these disappointments, I was challenged to continue trusting Jesus. I faced some issues in my life. I knew that I had a relationship with Christ that was true regardless of what I was feeling, but I also knew that I needed to continue in my pursuit of knowing Him more deeply. Even though I didn't discover every

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answer, I developed a conviction that truth was absolute, regardless of what I felt. My assurance of absolute truth remained firm, even if some of my friends would judge me for not being a relativist or pluralist.

That year, my basketball team ended up winning the championship ring. We were declared national champions by ESPN and *USA Today*. But my greatest victory that year was the opportunity to share the reasons for trusting Jesus with others and to grow in that trust myself. God taught me so much about trust in the process. Almost a decade later, I'm still searching for answers to some questions, but fortunately, I've also discovered some profound spiritual truths.

My life's message to all people (which grew out of the trials that catapulted me into a search for truth) is simply this: God loves you. He loves you so much that He sent His Son to die for your sins, and He has given you a heart and mind to passionately follow Him. It is possible to know truth.

Life isn't always easy, and sometimes circumstances don't work out the way you think they should, but even in the midst of some uncertainties, you can be sure of certain truths. You can trust Jesus. He will reveal himself to you when you seek Him with all of your heart, soul, and mind. You can have this certainty in Christ, because God has first given us a sureness founded on the basis of the knowledge of reality.

FAITH UNDER FIRE?

Even though Christianity is spreading more rapidly worldwide than ever before, if a person living in the United States claims that Jesus Christ is exclusively the Truth, he or she will appear absurd to many. Born in India, Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias writes:

We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface, often vented with cutting words. Philosophically, you can

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believe anything, so long as you do not claim it to be true. Morally, you can practice anything, so long as you do not claim that it is a better way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it.³

Zacharias continues, “If a spiritual idea is eastern, it is granted critical immunity; if western, it is thoroughly criticized. Thus, a journalist can walk into a church and mock its carryings on, but he or she dare not do the same if the ceremony is from the eastern fold. Such is the mood of the twentieth century.”⁴ In today’s atmosphere of intolerance toward Christianity, followers of Christ must have the foundation of knowing the historical Jesus (who, by the way, was not Western, but Eastern). If we are ridiculed or even hated for our faith, we must have a base of knowledge that’s unshakable. We will speak of the true Jesus in the chapters to come, but it is important that we have a foundational understanding that reality *is* indeed knowable. If truth is knowable, then our trust in truth has greater conviction.

Exclusivism isn’t a popular word today. In our society, we face opposition when we claim that our religion of Christianity is absolutely true. Religious exclusivism teaches that one religion is exclusively true, as opposed to religious pluralism, which teaches that multiple religions, often contradicting religions, are equally true.

The Oprah Winfrey Show presents a good example of religious pluralism expressed today through popular media. Often on this show, a guest will talk about his or her experiences with spirituality or morality. Sometimes Oprah will ask the audience for their opinions about the topic. On one occasion, when a member of the audience responded by referencing a biblical example, Oprah respectfully said, “One of the mistakes that human beings make is believing that there is only one way to live, and we don’t accept that there are diverse ways of being in the world.”⁵ She added, “There are many paths to what you call God. Her path may be something

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else, and when she gets there she may call it the Light.”⁶ When another audience member disagreed with Oprah and said that Jesus was the only way, Oprah responded by saying, “There can’t possibly be one way. I can’t get into a religious argument with you right now.”

Religious pluralism claims to be open-minded, but is it really? When we stop and think about the claims of religious pluralism, we discover that this worldview doesn’t accept any faith expression that is *not* pluralistic. Even though pluralism is touted at many universities as “open-mindedness,” it’s actually just another form of religious exclusivity. Why? Because it excludes anybody who doesn’t believe it. Therefore, religious pluralism excludes the beliefs of hundreds of millions of Christians who claim that Jesus Christ is the only way for salvation.

Interestingly, it’s not just Christianity that claims to be exclusively true. Muhammed, the founder of Islam, claimed Islam to be the true religion, and the teachers of Hinduism say *it* is the true religion. Then some Hindus decided to reject certain teachings of Hinduism, so they split off and started a new religion called Buddhism. Buddhism today includes hundreds of sects, each of which has its own set of spiritual beliefs. Religious pluralism rejects any of these religions that claim that their way is the *one* way that is true and correct. When you think about how many billions of people in the world follow these religions, you realize that most people are *not* true religious pluralists.

In addition to the fact that many are attacking our beliefs in the historical Christ and His claim to be the giver of salvation, many Americans are apathetic about or ignorant of spiritual things. Many of the people who are interested in spirituality are simply longing for a quick fix or an emotional experience. I heard a story in which someone was asked, “What is the greatest problem in our culture: ignorance or apathy?” To this, the person responded by saying, “I don’t know, and I don’t care!”

Consider the words of pop singer Britney Spears: “I think I’m more grounded, you know, and I know what I want out of life and

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I'm, you know, my morals are really, you know, strong, and I have major beliefs about certain things, and I think that has helped me.⁷ Her words echo the thoughts of many celebrities in our culture whose actions tell us that, "I really don't care about the most important things in life."

Many people continue to look to celebrities and Hollywood for guidance. J. P. Moreland, who holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Southern California, summed up the recent spiritual thought of many in Western culture:

Spirituality is in, but no one knows which form to embrace. Indeed, the very idea that one form may be better than another seems arrogant and intolerant. A flat stomach is of greater value than a mature character. The makeup man is more important than the speech writer. People listen, or pretend to listen, to what actors—actors—have to say! Western Civ had to go and, along with it, the possibility of getting a robust university education. Why? Because political correctness so rules our universities that they are now places of secular indoctrination, and one is hard-pressed to find serious classroom interaction from various perspectives on the crucial issues of our day.⁸

In our culture, why should we trust Jesus when people have so many other spiritual beliefs? In order for someone to have a reasonable trust in Jesus, he or she must have knowledge of the truth about His existence. Is it possible to trust someone you don't know? Well, yes, to some extent. When you vote for a political candidate, you may not know everything about him or her, but you vote for someone about whom you at least know certain things. You understand the underpinnings, the "heart," of what is important in that candidate's stand. The strongest trust is based on that about which one has knowledge.

Jesus calls us to a "trust" that is not antagonistic toward evi-

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dence and reason. Many Christians mistakenly believe that Jesus called His disciples to a “blind faith” or to a “leap of faith.” Truthfully, He called them to a “trust” based on fact, evidence, and reason. This doesn’t mean that God reveals all the answers immediately. Jesus called His disciples first *and then* spent three years with them, living out a life that they could observe and trust. However, the trust to which He calls us is not opposed to reason.

Let’s look at the dialogue between Jesus and His disciples recorded by one of Jesus’ closest disciples, John, right before Jesus is about to be turned over to the Roman soldiers to be put on trial, brutally beaten, mocked, and then executed. Jesus knows that He is about to die, and He treasures the time He has left with His disciples. The last words He speaks to them and for them are so vital. Jesus could have spoken about a number of other things, but He chose to talk to them about *trust*:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms, if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”⁹

Thomas and Phillip are a bit skeptical by nature. Phillip, with grave doubts, asked for some evidence so that he could place his trust in Jesus and the Father. Jesus, rather than asking them to practice a “blind faith,” always offers evidence that shows why they can trust Him. Let’s continue in the passage in John:

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Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip? . . . Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.”¹⁰

Jesus didn’t say, “Just blindly trust what I am telling you.” No! He gave evidence of His claims throughout the time He spent with the disciples by performing miracles before them. Jesus also predicted His supernatural physical resurrection a few verses later when he said, “Because I live, you also will live.” Philip, though skeptical, also believed in Christ because of the testimony of the laws and prophets that spoke of the coming Messiah. We’ll discuss these prophecies and the resurrection in further detail in the chapters to come. But for now, we want to emphasize that Jesus does not call us to blindly trust in Him. Rather, He tells us to trust something of which we have knowledge.

Some people may say, “Well, that might be true for you, but it’s not true for me,” because they believe that truth is not objective. This view is called *relativism*, which is similar to the religious pluralism that we discussed earlier. Relativism in regard to truth teaches that truth is not discovered by an individual or group of people, but is created or determined by the individual or group of people. This view may teach that the Bible is true for those who have faith or belief in it, but not necessarily true for those who do not have faith in it.

The foundation of trusting in Jesus is that He is true. But if absolute truth does not exist, then to say that “Jesus is the Truth” is a meaningless statement. Many definitions of truth fail, but a good definition of truth is “that which corresponds to reality”; simply put, truth is “telling it like it is.” Paul Copan, in *True for You, But Not for Me*, lists several characteristics of truth:

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- Something can be true even if no one knows it.
- Something can be true even if no one admits it.
- Something can be true even if no one agrees what it is.
- Something can be true even if no one follows it.
- Something can be true even if no one but God grasps it fully.¹¹

Copan continues, “Although some states have given up trying to figure out whom to blame for car accidents, hence no-fault insurance, truth matters. And when the stakes are raised, when a child crossing the street is hit by a truck and killed, for example, finding the truth becomes essential. Serious circumstances remind us that the difficulty of finding truth is no excuse for not looking.”¹²

We all insist on knowing the truth in our daily lives. We have expectations that the court will convict only the truly guilty. We expect to know the truth in our relationships. Most people never enter a relationship expecting their loved one to be untruthful or unfaithful. Even with simple daily tasks like going to the bank, we expect the banker to tell us the truth about our finances. We want the doctor to tell us the truth about our medical condition. When you need to use a public restroom, you expect the truth when you read the “men” or “women” sign.

In order for someone to trust Jesus, he must have knowledge that the claims of Jesus are true. Dr. R. C. Sproul notes:

Trust is personal—it is a special part of any close human relationship. Trust is a by-product of truth, and personal relationships are built upon trust. I trust people who demonstrate that they are truthful. I do not trust people who show themselves to be habitual liars. A person who is trustworthy is a person who is truthful.¹³

Today, some people are attempting to deny absolute truth and the simple laws of logic. When this happens, a person often commits

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the fallacy of giving a *self-defeating statement*. A self-defeating statement is a statement that fails to meet its own standard. For example, if someone said, “I can’t speak of word of English,” in English, this would be a self-defeating statement. Why? Because he or she just spoke that sentence *in English!*

In the same way, if someone says, “There is no absolute truth!” you could respond by saying, “Is that absolutely true?” If so, the person has just contradicted himself or herself. If someone says, “You can’t *know any truth* about God!” you could respond by saying, “How do you *know* that about God being unknowable?” That in itself is a “truth claim” that the person is professing to know. It’s a self-defeating statement.

People attempt to violate the simple laws of logic at academic institutions, at work, in Hollywood, and in everyday life. Actress and singer Mandy Moore was once asked in an interview, “What’s your biggest pet peeve now that you’ve been in the industry awhile?” Mandy responded by saying, “People who don’t take others into consideration.” She continued, “I don’t like [people who] are intolerant—whether it be of race or religion or sexual preference. It really gets me going.”¹⁴

If you had been there, you could have asked Ms. Moore, “Aren’t you being *intolerant* of intolerant people?” It is true that tolerance can be a positive attribute at times, but it’s equally true that people should be intolerant of some things. I am thankful that Abraham Lincoln was intolerant of slavery, Martin Luther King Jr. was intolerant of racism, that Billy Graham is intolerant of sin, and that Winston Churchill was intolerant of oppression. Isn’t Mandy Moore being intolerant when she says, “I don’t like (people who) are intolerant”? As we mentioned earlier, relativism (or the denial of absolutes, which is found in this new so-called tolerance) is not consistently open-minded. It violates the simple laws of logic.

When a person trusts in Christ, he or she must understand that Jesus is Truth. If Jesus Christ and His teachings are absolutely true, then anything opposed to Him is false. Truth is a cornerstone to

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authentic trust. When Christians stop believing in absolute truth, their worldviews, and eventually their lifestyles, will both be affected.

Research done by George Barna and Josh McDowell reports how one's beliefs affect one's behavior. Barna and McDowell discovered that if a person doesn't believe in absolute truth, he or she will be:

- 200% more likely to steal
- 200% more likely to watch a pornographic film
- 300% more likely to use illegal drugs
- 600% more likely to attempt suicide¹⁵

When people deny absolute truth, the foundations of their personal convictions are knocked off course, and the next thing to go off track is their behavior. It's critical that we *know truth* as a foundation of trusting Jesus. Unfortunately, most people in our culture do not believe in the importance of being grounded with a strong foundation of knowledge. Some people just want to have “blind faith” in Christ that only involves the heart and feelings while excluding the mind and reason. This is contrary to what Jesus Himself commanded. He wants us to offer Him our heart *and* our mind. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God, with all of your heart and with all of your soul, and with all of your *mind*.”¹⁶

In the book of Isaiah, God says, “Come now, let us reason together.”¹⁷ God the Father also wants our minds and our hearts. In order for us to trust Him, we must involve both heart and intellect. Some of us don't like to study, because studying God's truth takes focus and discipline. However, such discipline ought to be part of the Christian life. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”¹⁸ Paul said, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”¹⁹ This certainly includes mental discipline as well.

One of the reasons that you can trust Jesus is because He loves

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you so much that He has given you a mind that can embrace the truth about reality. The book of Psalms says, “Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.”²⁰ It’s not a trusting in something that we don’t know, but it’s trusting in something we can know, even if our knowledge is limited.

We don’t have to have all of the answers (in fact, we never will on this side of heaven), but God calls us to passionately pursue His truth. God says in the Bible, “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all of your heart.”²¹ Another verse says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”²² He assures us that He is worthy of our trust. Once we have a foundation of knowing truth, then we can pursue Him, and once we know Him, we trust what He tells us in His Word.

That’s what happened to me when I was a senior in high school at Oak Hill Academy. I wasn’t a skilled teacher or speaker. I didn’t have the answers to every difficult theological question that the guys threw at me. But God allowed me to discover His truth step-by-step. I had made up my mind to pursue truth in the journey of trusting Jesus.

Although we all have a unique life journey, salvation is received through placing our faith in the sacrificial atonement of Christ alone. We discuss this more in future chapters, but we can acknowledge that one of the reasons we trust Christ is because the truth about spiritual beliefs is knowable. With certainty beyond a reasonable doubt, we can know and experience that truth. Because of this foundation, we will be able to trust Jesus, who reveals Himself to us in truth.