

Telling (and Living) a Better Story

Session 1: The Challenge Before Us



Our Challenge

“In 2000 years, we've never learned how to do mission in a place that was post-Christian rather than pre-Christian. If you're in ministry, it's going to take all of your life to help the church figure out how to do this.”— Tim Keller



Some Good News

1. We're not alone
2. Humans are story-telling beings
3. The Gospel Story is embedded in secular hearts and imaginations

1. We're Not Alone

The Spirit of Christ

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, ***I am with you always, to the end of the age.***” Matthew 28:18-20

1. We're Not Alone

The Church worldwide

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Mark 10:29–30.

1. We're Not Alone

The Church through the ages



2. We're Story-Telling Beings

“I am standing waiting for a bus and a young man standing next to me suddenly says, ‘The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus*, *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*.’



Alasdair MacIntyre

“There is a problem as to the meaning of the sentence · he uttered: the problem is how to answer the question, what was he doing in uttering it?

We would render his action of utterance intelligible if one of the following turned out to be true.”

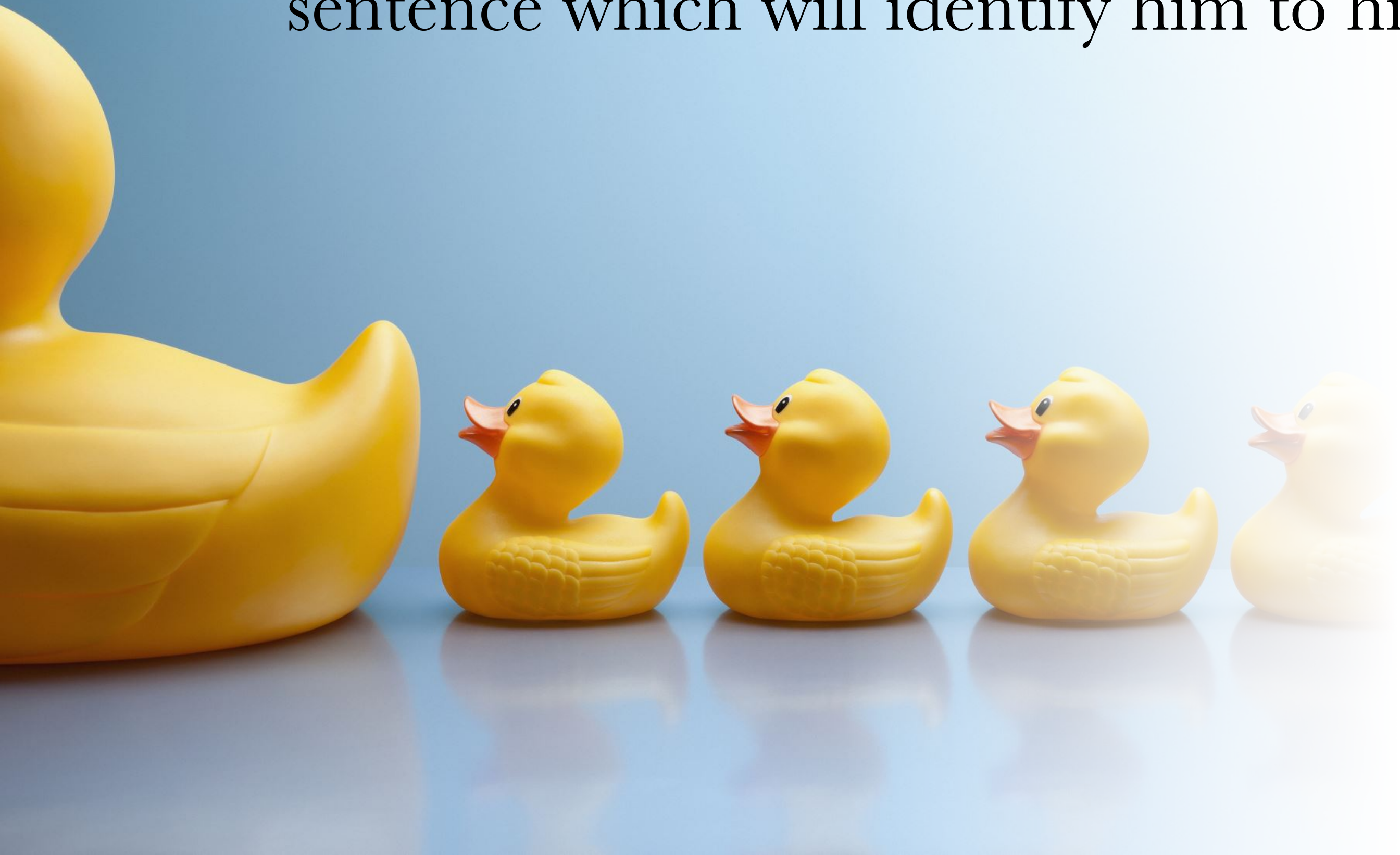
“He has mistaken me for someone who yesterday had approached him in the library and asked: ‘Do you know the Latin name of the common wild duck?’”



“Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who has urged him to break down his shyness by talking to strangers. ‘But what shall I say?’ ‘Oh, anything at all.’”



“Or he is a Soviet spy waiting at a prearranged rendezvous and uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact.”



“In each case the act of utterance becomes intelligible by finding its place in a narrative.”



Man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal

I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do' if I can answer the prior question '***Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?***'

3. The Gospel Story is embedded in Post-Christian hearts and imaginations

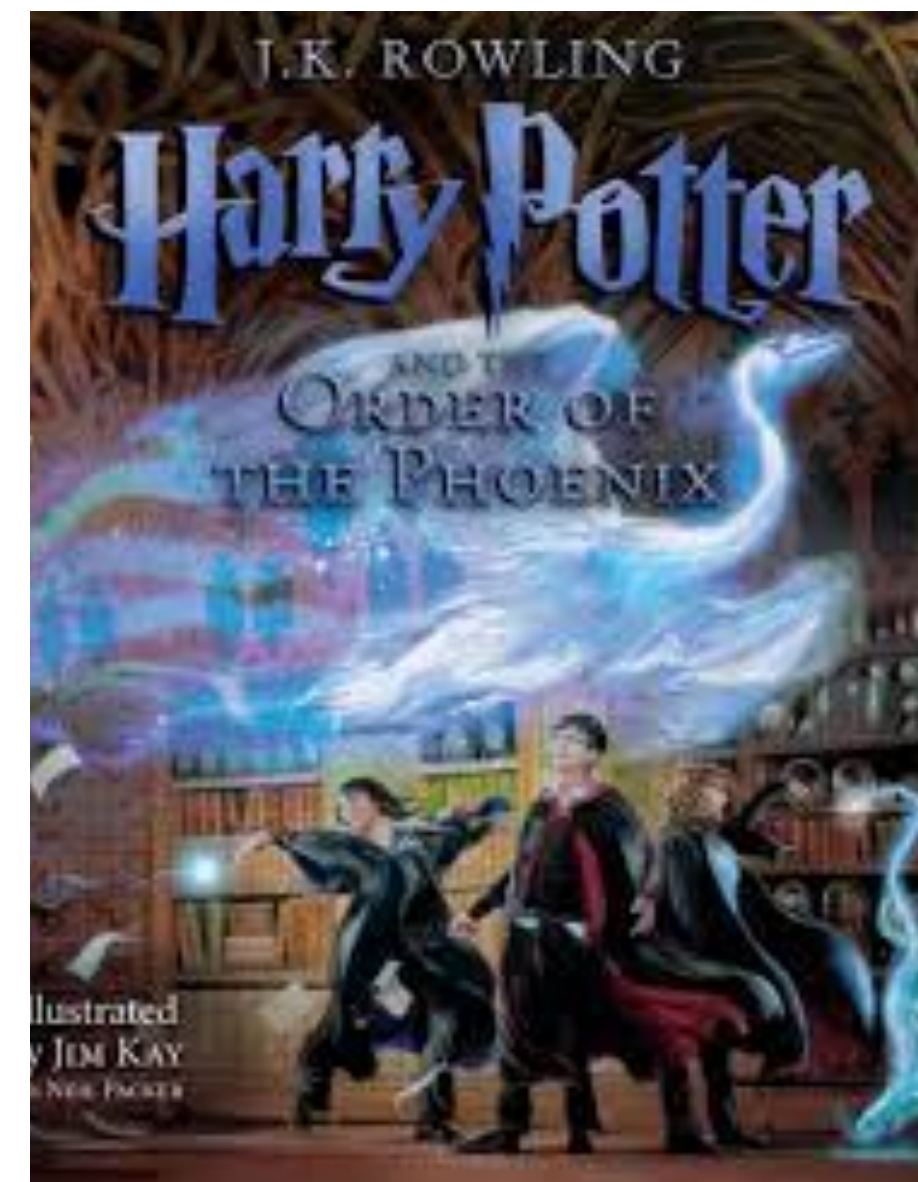
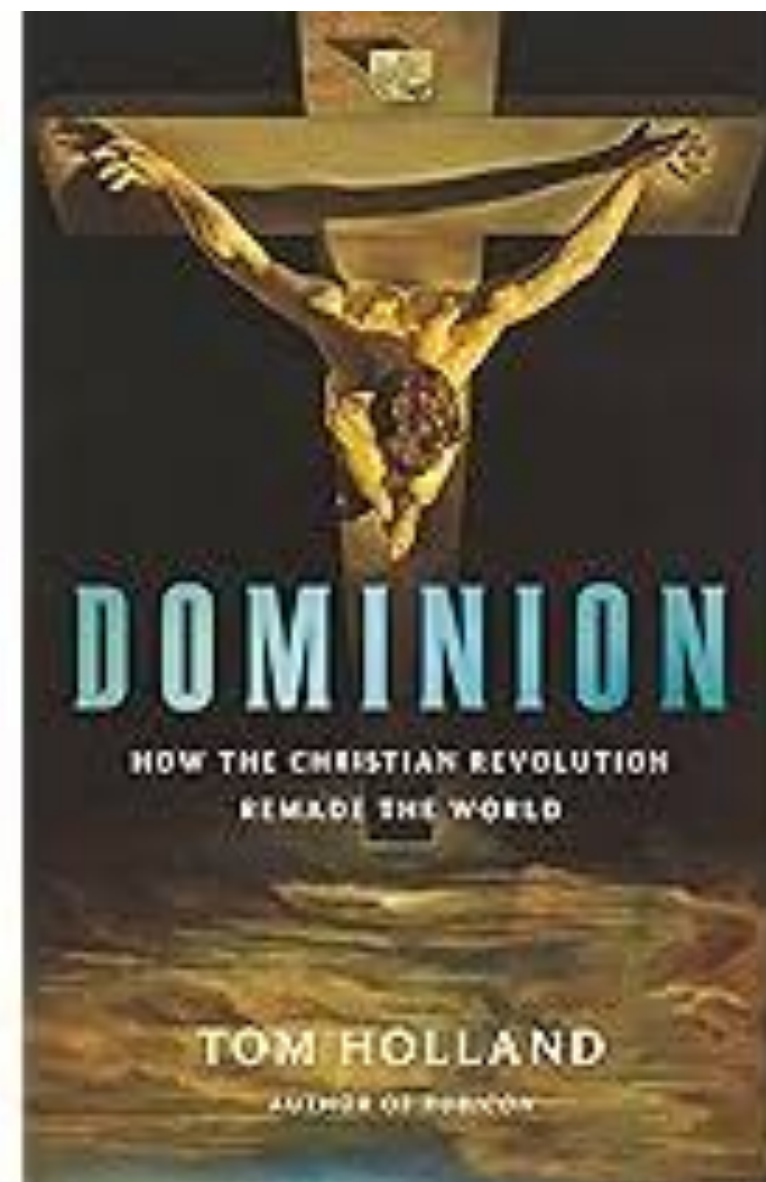
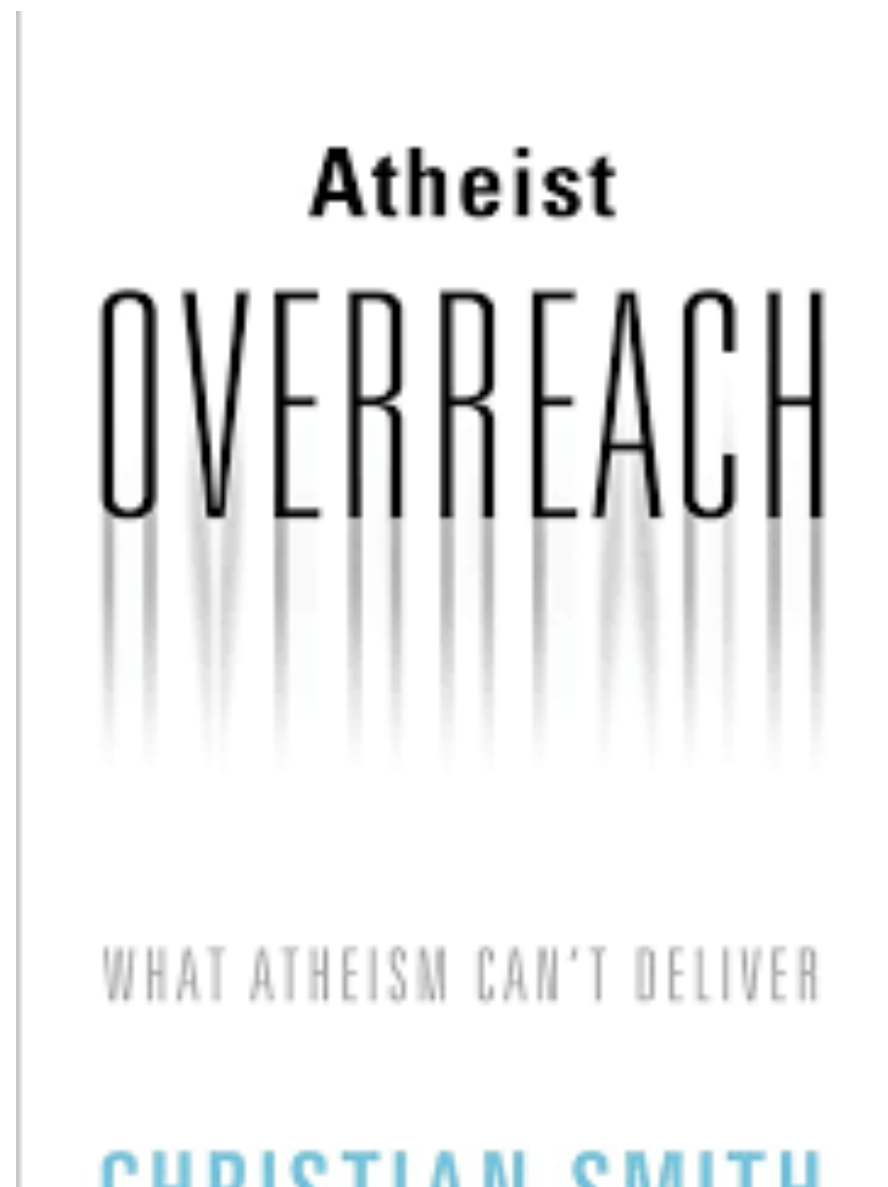
“I don’t believe in God,
but I miss him.”

Julian Barnes



“When you give up Christian faith, you pull the rug out from under your right to Christian morality as well . . . You smash the whole system.”

Friedrich Nietzsche



Telling (and Living) a Better Story

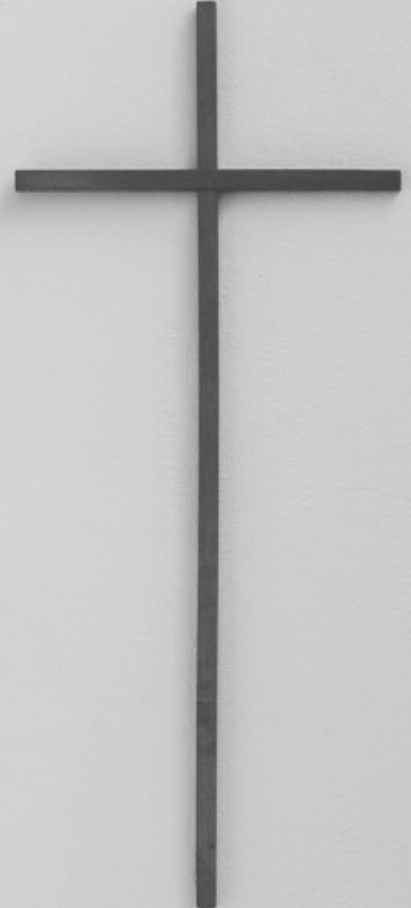
Session 2: Double Listening



“We listen to the Word with humble reverence anxious to understand it and *resolved to believe and obey* what we have come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe it and obey it, but to sympathize with it and *to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.*”

John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*





"For I resolved
to know nothing
while I was with you
except Jesus Christ
and him crucified."

I Corinthians 2:2

Two Biblical Examples of Double Listening

- Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16-34)
- Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians



Paul with the Greeks - Acts 17:16-34

- 1. Paul listens and speaks with his audience.**
- 2. Paul challenges his audience.**
- 3. Paul takes them to Jesus.**

Paul speaks with the Corinthians

1. Paul listens and speaks with his audience.

2. Paul challenges his audience.

3. Paul take them to The Gospel.

Listening within Post-Christendom

“You believe in God?

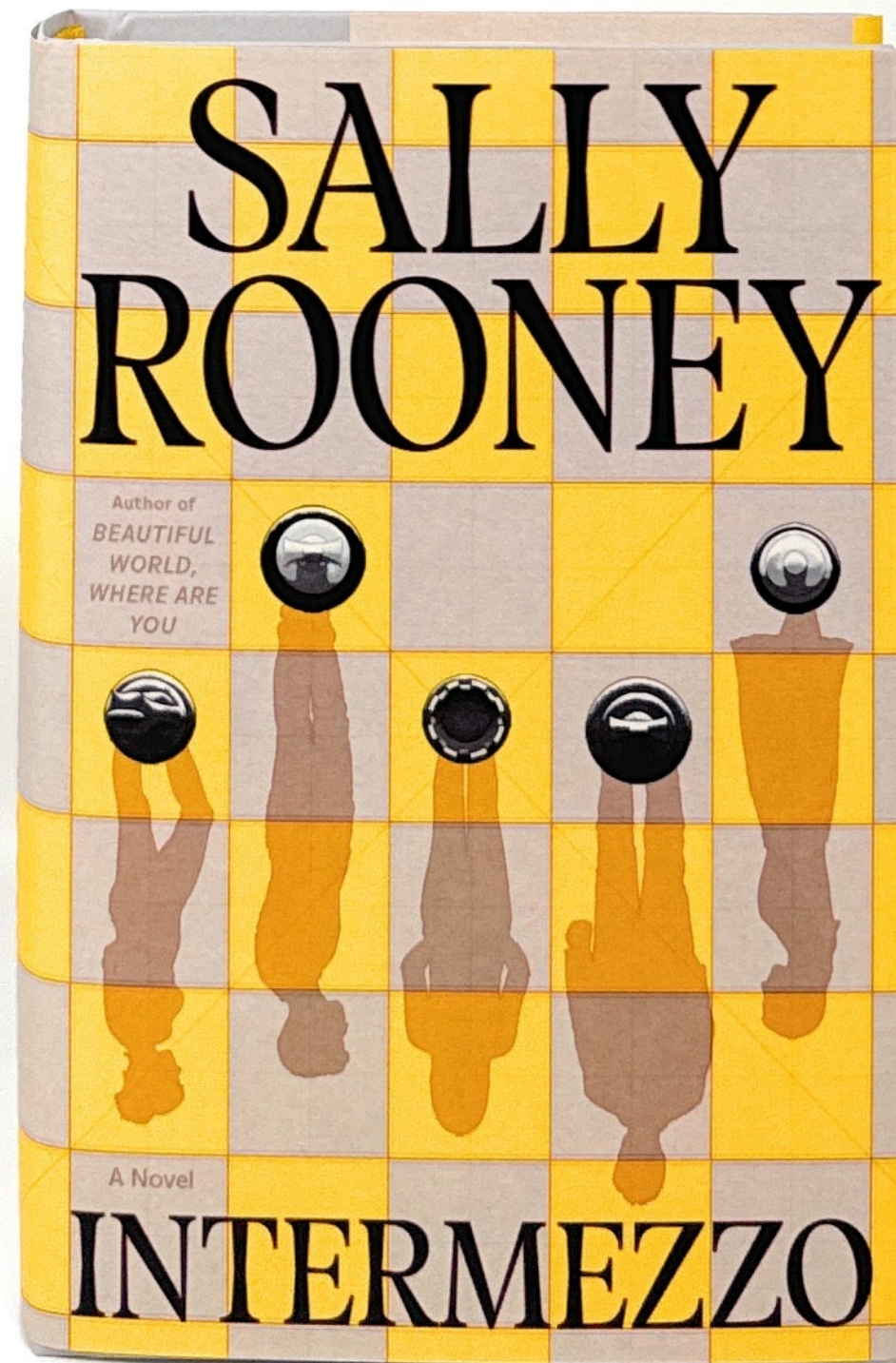
Oh, says, Peter. I’m not sure, I don’t know. I suppose I would say, I try to.”

Listening within Post-Christendom

“Ivan looks back at him calmly, somehow wisely. Same, he says. That I try to.

Although it doesn't always work, but I do my best. ”

Unworlding



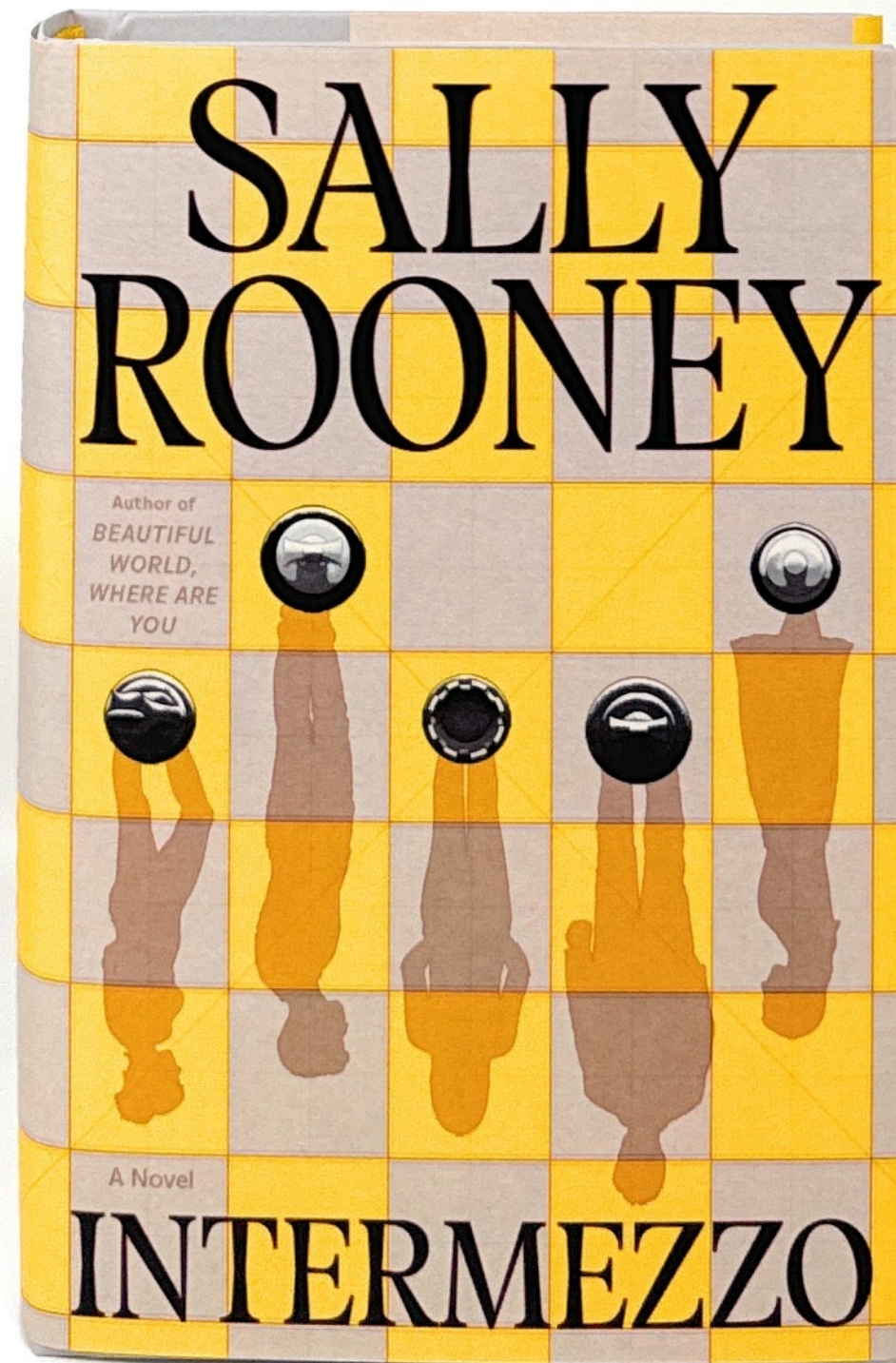
Peter's character reflects what some scholars have labeled a modern social phenomenon: the “unworlding” of the world—“a loss of the sense of the overarching context that gives coherence to the world.”

Searching for Ways to Cope

“The meaningless lives people live.
And afterwards, oblivion, forever.
Futile rage at nothing. Directed one
way or another, what’s the difference.”



A Space In-Between



“Like, I don’t know, to find beauty in life, maybe it’s related to right and wrong. But I haven’t thought it out too fully. Sometimes I just have a feeling. Like a sense of being loved by God, almost. But it’s not really something that can be explained.”

Four Things I'm Hearing



James K. A. Smith

HOW (NOT)
TO BE
SECULAR

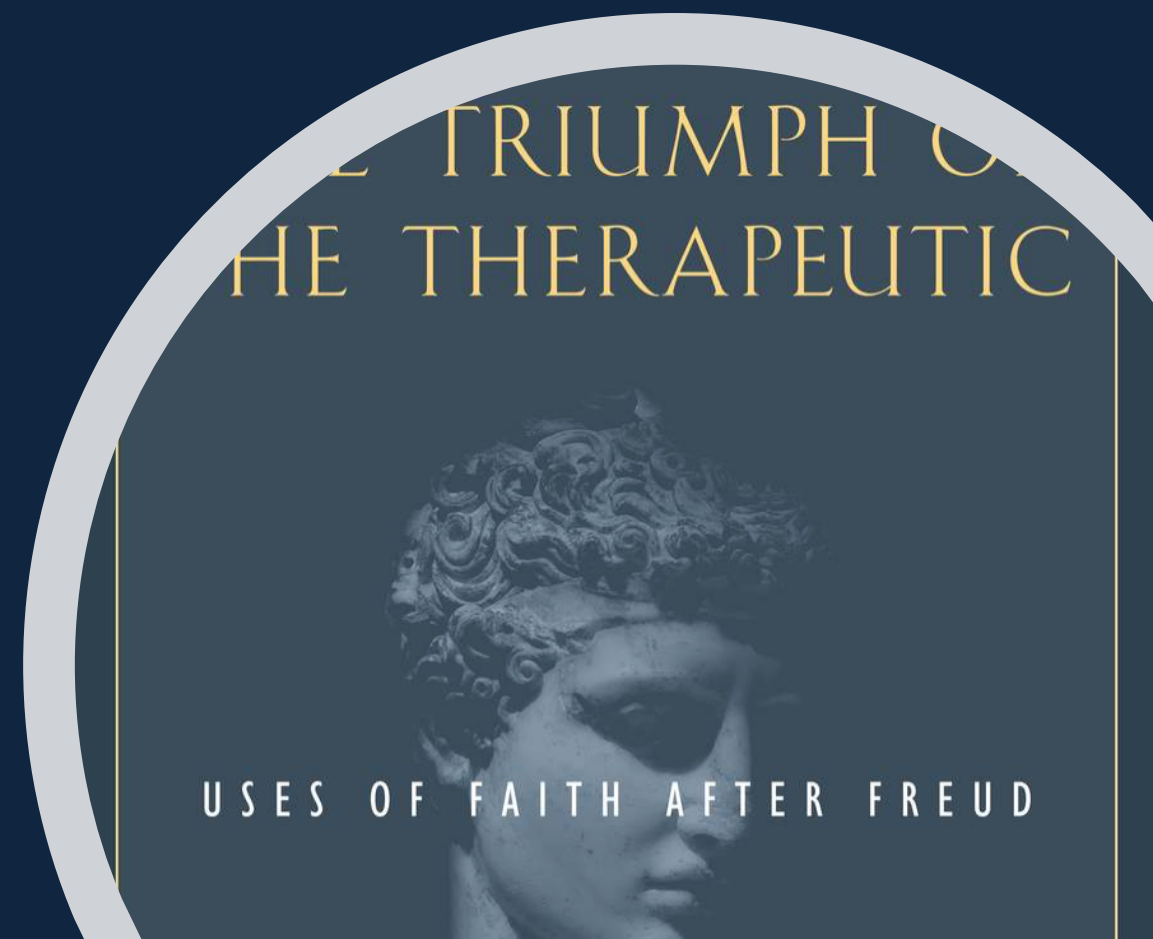
Reading Charles Taylor

1. The Posture: Less Confident

- Not the same swagger and confidence of the 2000's New Atheists
- Felt Contestability
- The NONES - only a small percentage are atheists.
- Nova Effect
- More likely to recognize they are offering a "Take"

2. The Goal: Feeling Better

- Philip Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*
- The Ted Lasso Phenomenon

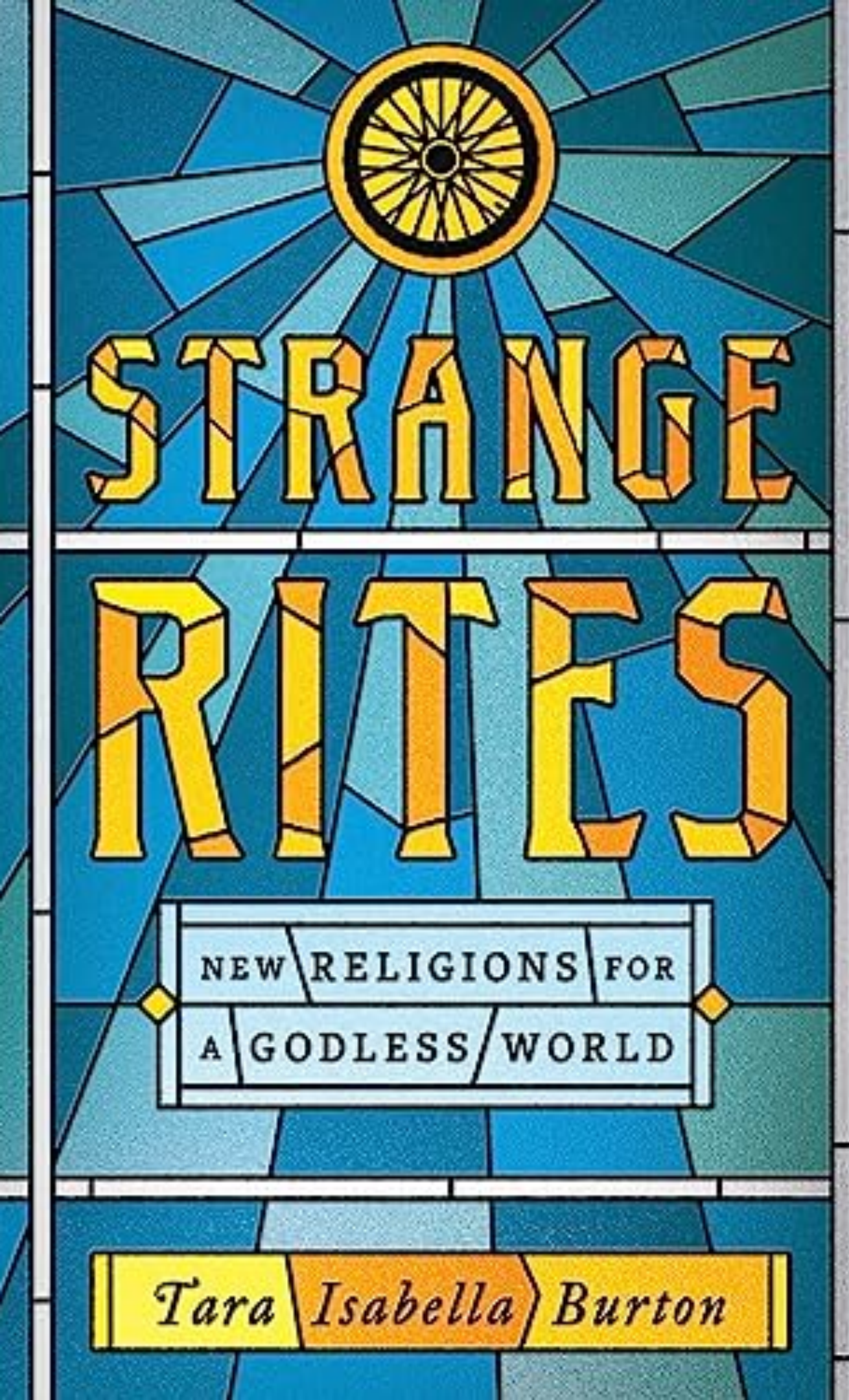


3. The Resistance: Moral Reasons

“I did not want a Christian God. I didn’t want an all-knowing God. I didn’t want a God that said some people go here and some people go there. I didn’t like any of those options.” – Dax Shepard

“It does put a question mark over the whole thing, the way people can get sick, and God does nothing to help them.” - *Intermezzo*





4. The Worship: Consumeristic Spirituality

- The rejection authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism in favor of intuition, personal feeling, and experiences.
- The demand to rewrite our own scripts about how the universe, and human beings, operate.
- Shaped by creative-communicative Internet and consumer capitalism, we live in an age of bespoke spirituality



Our Athens and Corinth

- The Posture: Less Confidence
- The Goal: Feeling Better
- The Resistance: Moral Reasons
- The Worship: Consumeristic

What are you hearing as you
listen to the world?

A detailed engraving of Blaise Pascal, showing him from the chest up. He has long, curly hair and is looking slightly to the right with a thoughtful expression. He is wearing a dark, textured garment with a white collar.

Evangelism with Pascal

1. Help them see they should at least respect Christianity.
2. Work to unveil the beauty, goodness, and livability of Christianity
3. Labor to help them see it is rationally credible.

1. Why respect it?

Consider Apple's hit series *The Morning Show*

“Human nature, it's surprisingly universal, and it's universally disappointing.”

– Billy Crudup

“As human beings we are fallible, we are capable of horrible things,” but, she adds, “we are capable of wonderful things.” – Reese Witherspoon

SEPTEMBER 13 | 

“The big question . . . Is there redemption for anyone? Is there forgiveness?”

—Jennifer Aniston

2. Why wish it is true?



Adapted from Tim Keller,
"Evangelism and Apologetics,"
City Ministry Program, 2022

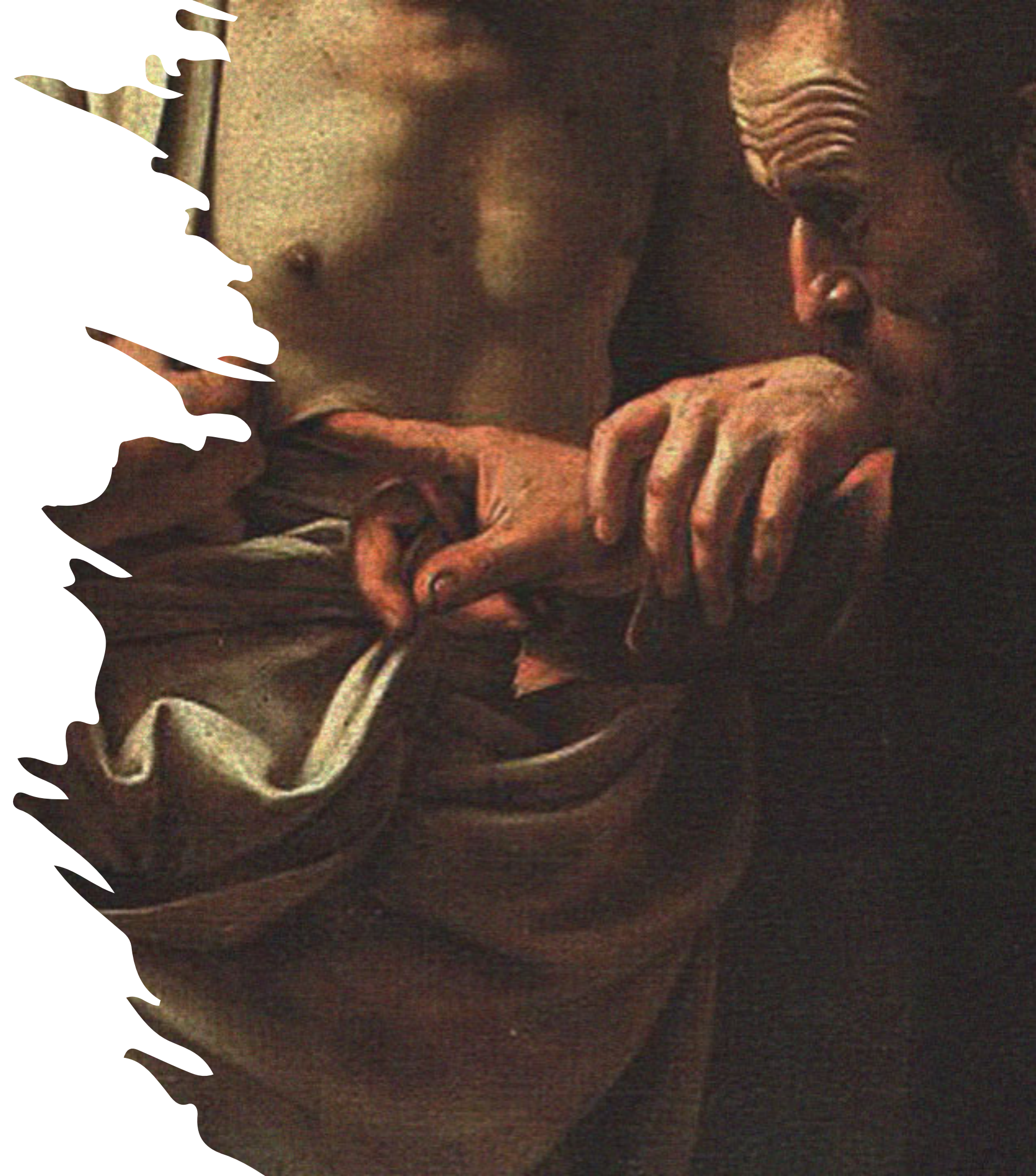
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3. Why it is credible?

The Christian Story Explains More

The Resurrection Best Explains the Historical Surprise of Christianity

1. The Death
2. The Claim
3. The Missing Body
4. The Witnesses
5. The Worship



Telling (and Living) a Better Story

Session 3: Telling a Better Story





Our Athens and Corinth

- The Posture: Less Confidence
- The Goal: Feeling Better
- The Resistance: Moral Reasons
- The Worship: Consumeristic

Problems with Old Models?

Assume too much:

- Biblical Literacy
- An Awareness of their own Sin
- Felt Relevancy

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Assume too much:

- Biblical Literacy
- An Awareness of their own Sin
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Persuasion?



A Way Forward?

“It is important that we understand how profoundly we all felt the needs that religion, down the ages, has satisfied. I would suggest that these needs are of three types;

“Firstly, the need to be *given an articulation of our half-glimpsed knowledge of exaltation, of awe, of wonder*; **life is an awesome experience**, and religion helps us understand why life so often makes us feel small, by telling us what we are smaller than; and, contrariwise, because *we also have a sense of being special*, of being chosen, religion helps us by telling us what we have been chosen by, and what for. ...

“Secondly, we need answers to the unanswerable: how did we get here? How did “*here*” get here in the first place? **Is this—this brief life—all there is? How can it be? What would be the point of that?**

And, thirdly, **we need codes to live by**, rules for [everything].



“The idea of god is at once a repository for our awestruck wonderment at life and an answer to the great questions of existence, and a rulebook, too.

The soul needs all these explanations—not simply rational explanations, but explanations of the heart.

It is also important to understand how often the language of secular, rationalist materialism has failed to answer these needs.”





Salman Rushdie, “Is Nothing Sacred?”

Listening to the Word: Creation

- We are image bearers made to reflect God and worship Him. Genesis 1:26
- All people are created with a knowledge of God.
- Romans 1:21 “They knew God...”
- Acts 17:24–25 Paul appeals to creation
 - “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”

Listening with St. Augustine

The Sentiments of the Soul

“Nobody in fact can live any style of life without those three sentiments of the soul; of believing, hoping, loving.” *Sermon 198*

The question becomes **who** or **what story about the world** makes the most rational, emotional, cultural, and existential sense to believe, hope, and love?

What are people:

- trusting in for meaning, value, and identity?
- hoping in for peace and stability?
- looking to for ultimate love and happiness?



Listening to the Word: The Fall

- We suppress the knowledge of God. Romans 1:18, 21
- Yet, humans can't fully escape the image of God stamped on our hearts.
- All people still worship. Romans 1:23-25
- Acts 17:23 – Paul appeals to the Athenians as worshippers:

“For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you”

Listening with St. Augustine

Sorrow as a sign

“No one’s vice is so completely contrary to nature that it destroys even the last vestiges of nature.” Augustine, *The City of God* 19.12

“For anyone who feels pain at the lost peace of his nature feels this due to some remnant of that peace by virtue of which his nature still shows its care for itself.” *The City of God* 19.13



Listening to the Word: The Good News

Paul applies the Gospel to the idolatry and brokenness of the Athenians and the Corinthians.

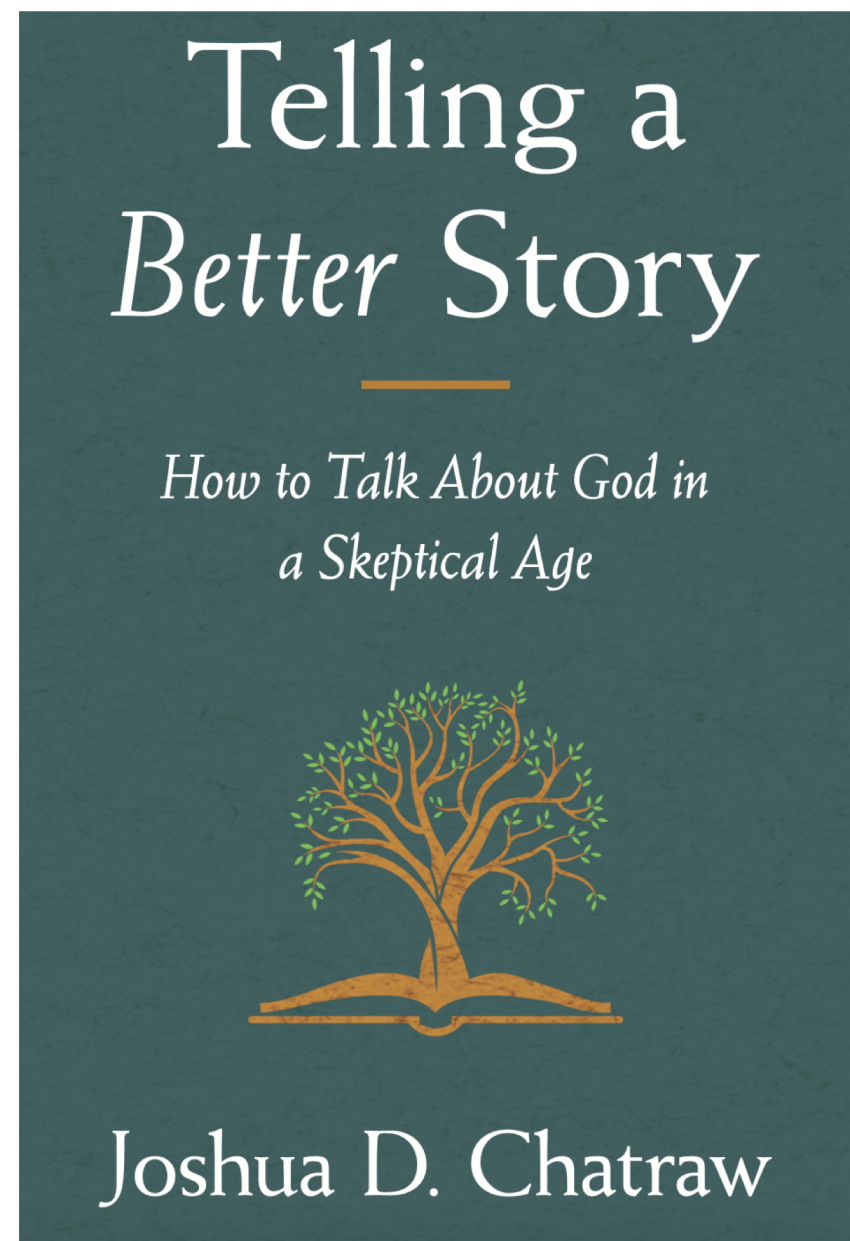
Acts 17:29-31 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Listening to the Word: The Good News

Paul applies the Gospel to the idolatry and brokenness of the Athenians and the Corinthians.

1 Cor. 15:1-4 “Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,”

Inside Out: An Approach for Everyday

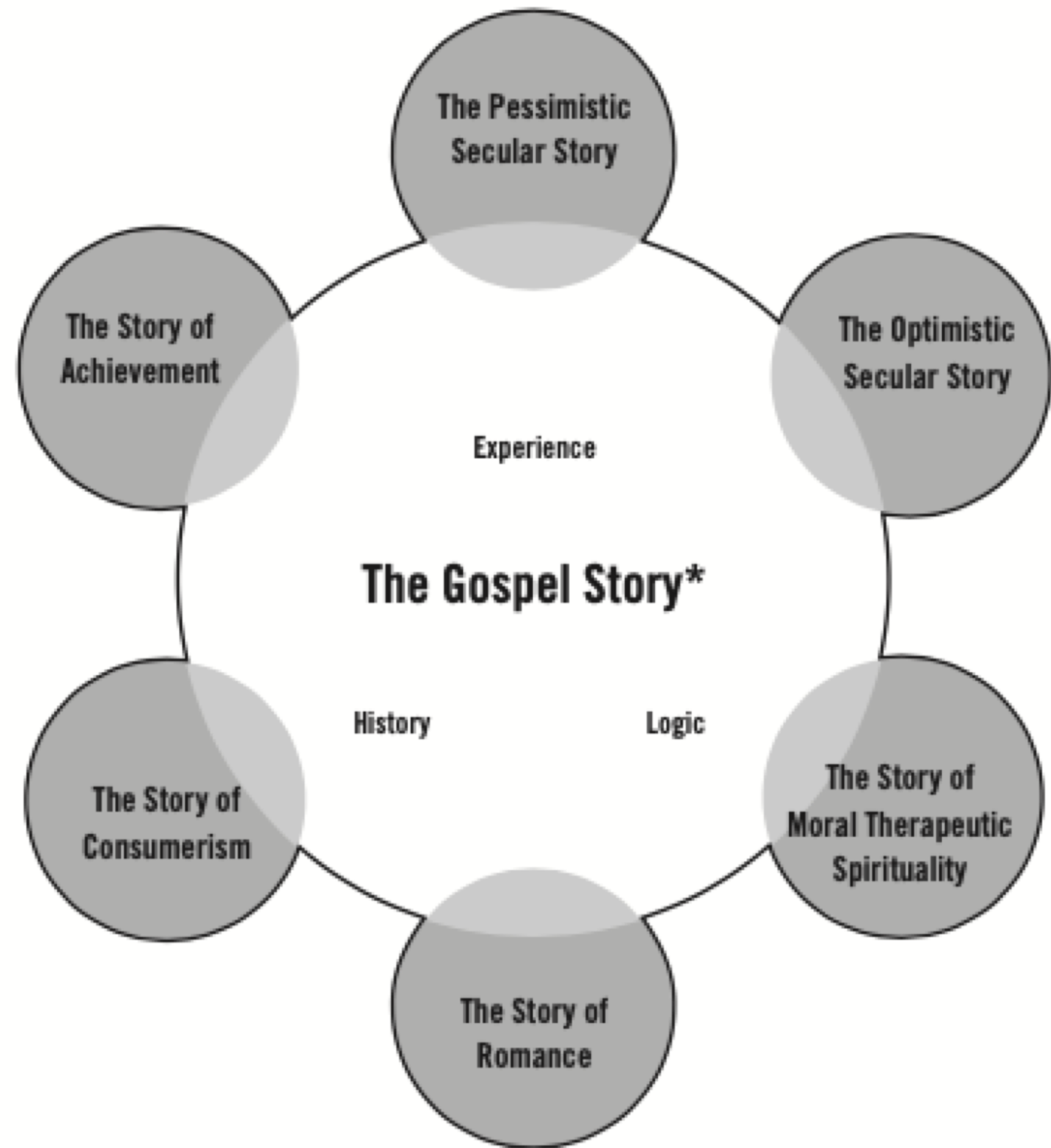


Learn to ask others: “Tell me Your Story?”

Learn to ask yourself: “What story is this person (or are these people) absorbed in?”

Step Inside the Other Person's Story

- What can I affirm and what will I need to challenge?
- How might they already be feeling the pain and disintegration of living against the grain of God's universe?
- What realities are they avoiding?
- Where will this lead?



Take them Outside to Christ

- How might you take them to Christ through the Biblical Story?
- How does the Gospel make better sense than the narratives they are believing in and the idols they are hoping in?



**We're inviting others: Try it on. See how the Gospel fits.
Come, taste and see.**

“I believe in Christianity as I
believe that the Sun has risen,
not only because I see it, but
because by it I see everything
else.” C. S. Lewis



The Opportunities of Post-Christendom?

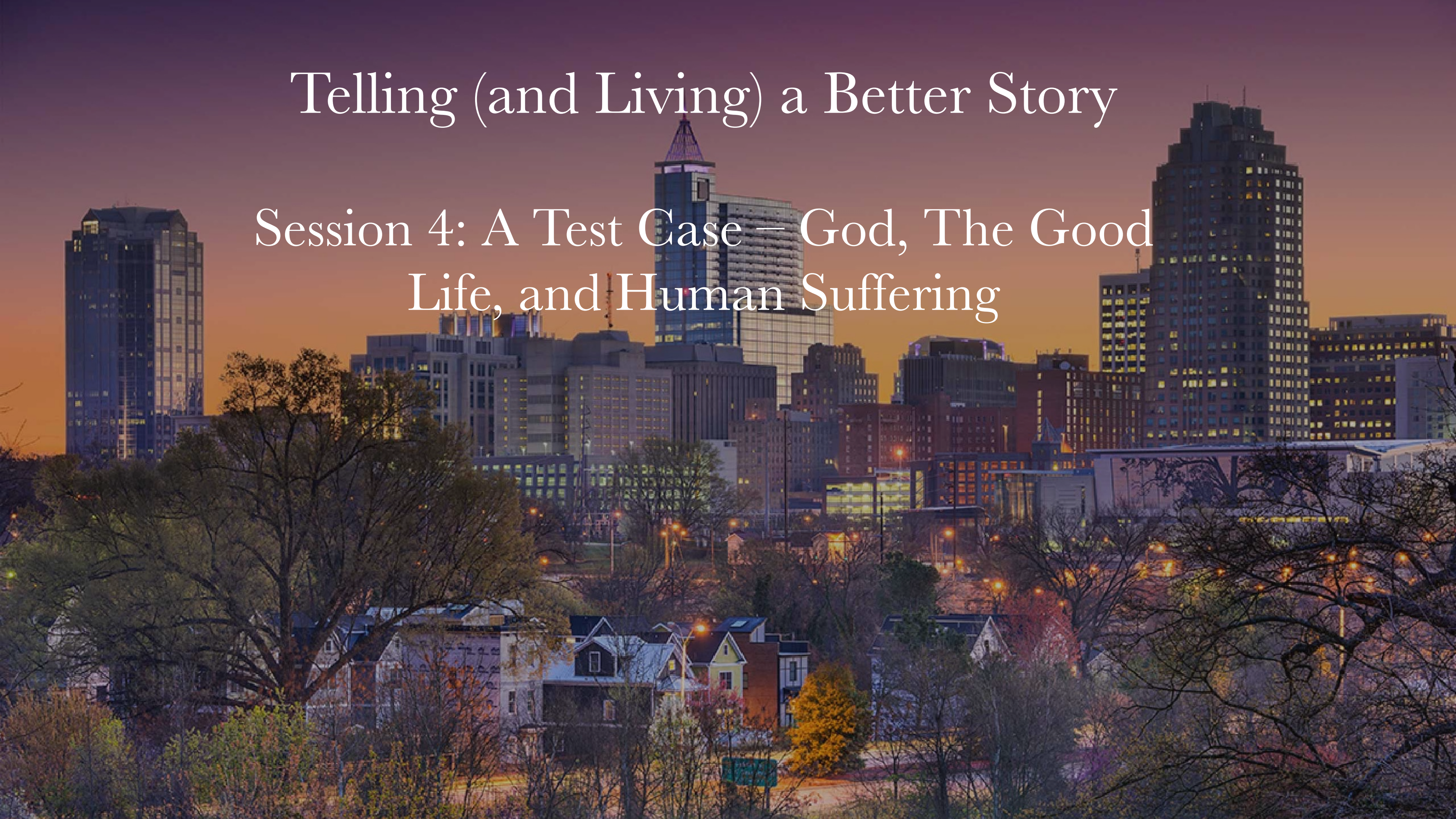
“It is for this reason that the present age is better than Christendom. In the old Christendom, everyone was a Christian and hardly anyone thought twice about it. But in the present age the survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer in the desert, like St. Anthony; which is to say, open to signs.”

-Walker Percy



Telling (and Living) a Better Story

Session 4: A Test Case — God, The Good Life, and Human Suffering



PHILOSOPHY

as a Way of Life

PIERRE HADOT

Edited and with an Introduction
by Arnold I. Davidson



The Human Quest for the Good life



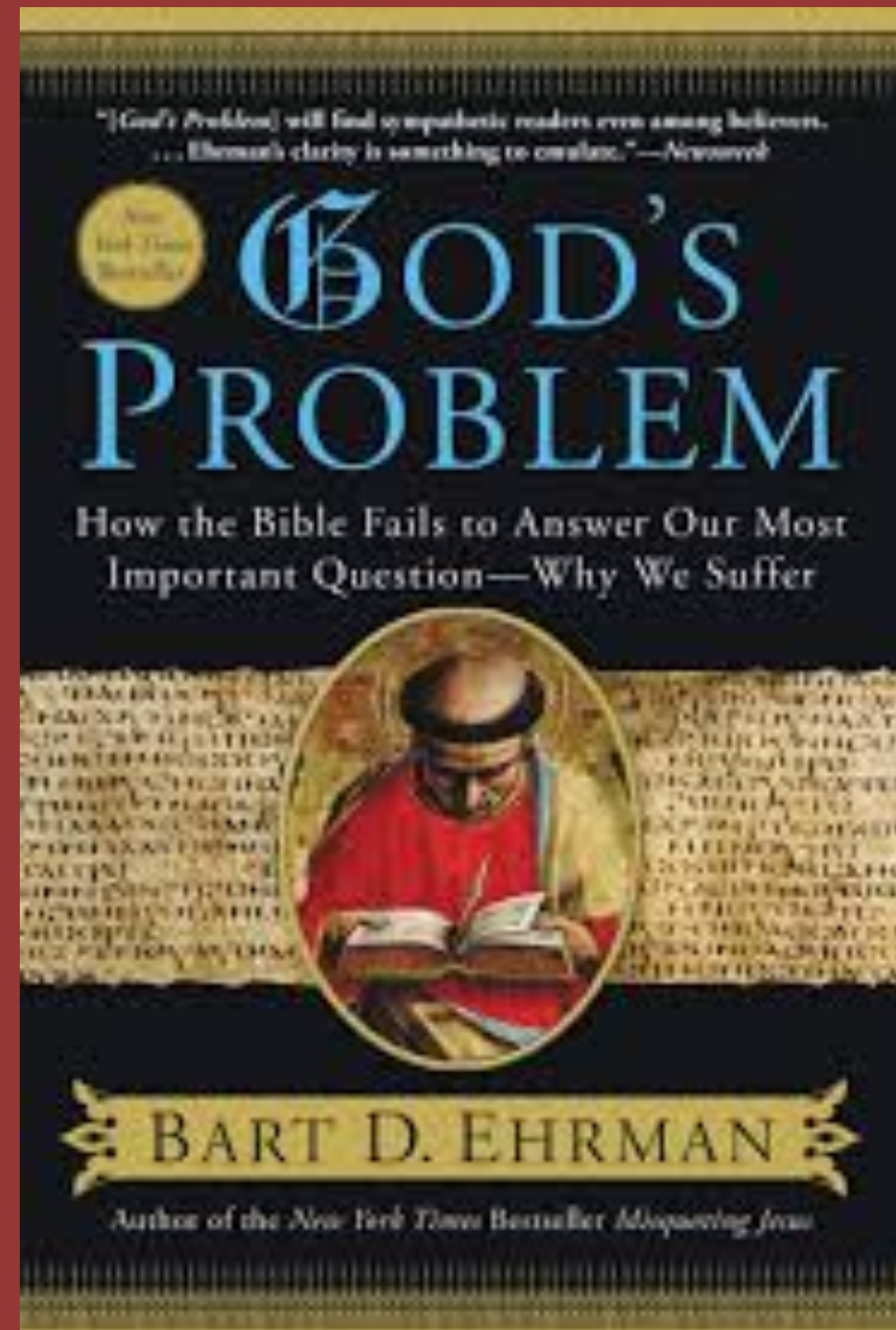
Our Search for Happiness

- Evil
- Suffering
- Disappointment
- Loss
- Death

The Problem of Evil

“I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things.”

Bart Ehrman



Another Skeptic

“Christians don’t, nor do other believers
in God, as far as I know, really know why
God permits evil.”



A Different Kind of Skeptic

“Christians don’t, nor do other believers in God, as far as I know, really know why God permits evil.”

Alvin Plantinga (Christian Philosopher)

Posture Problems

Problem # 1

Over Confidence in our Own Capacities to Understand and Solve

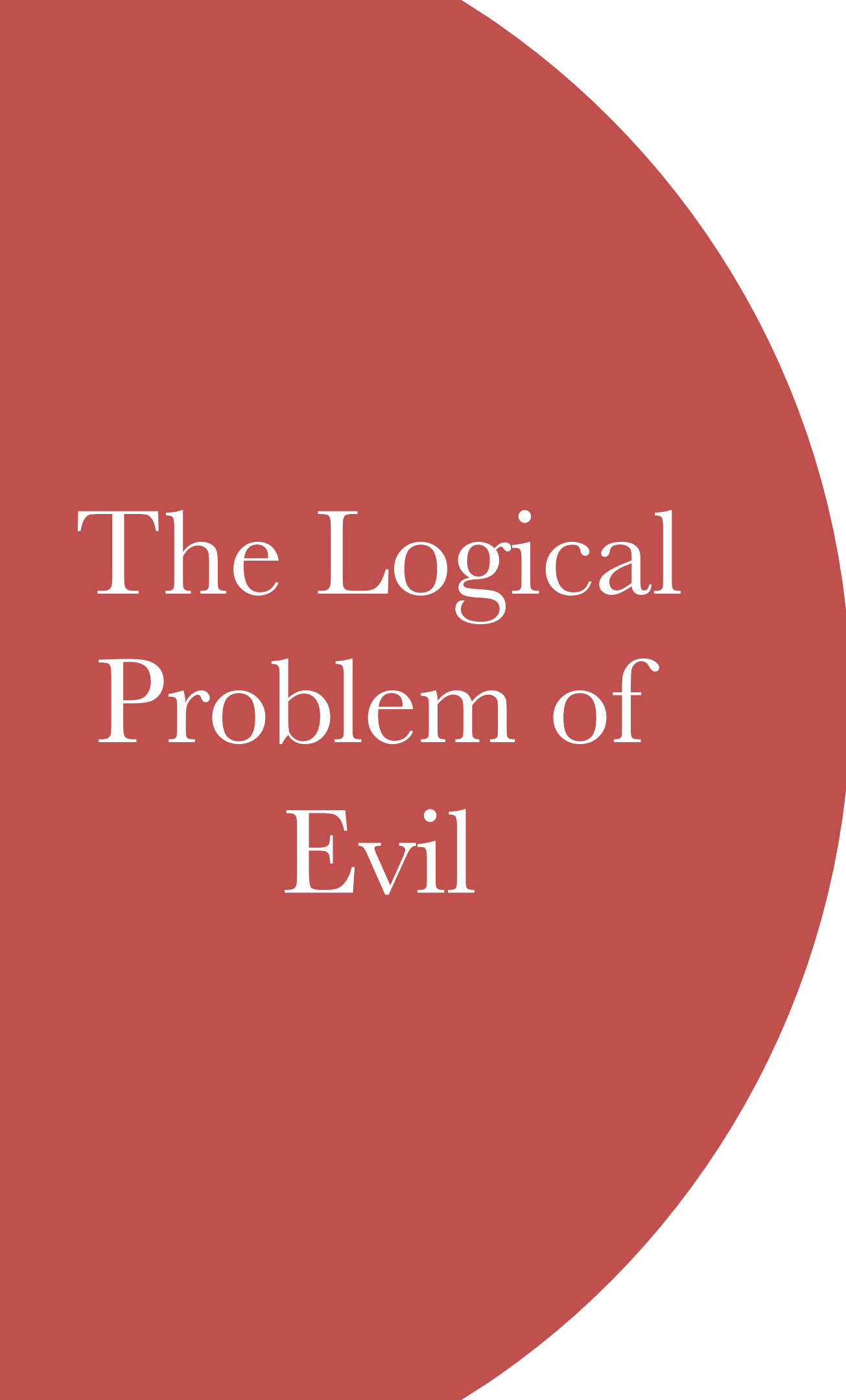
Posture Problems

Problem #2:

False Expectations for how Christianity and the Bible Work

Ehrman's Description of Biblical Responses to Suffering

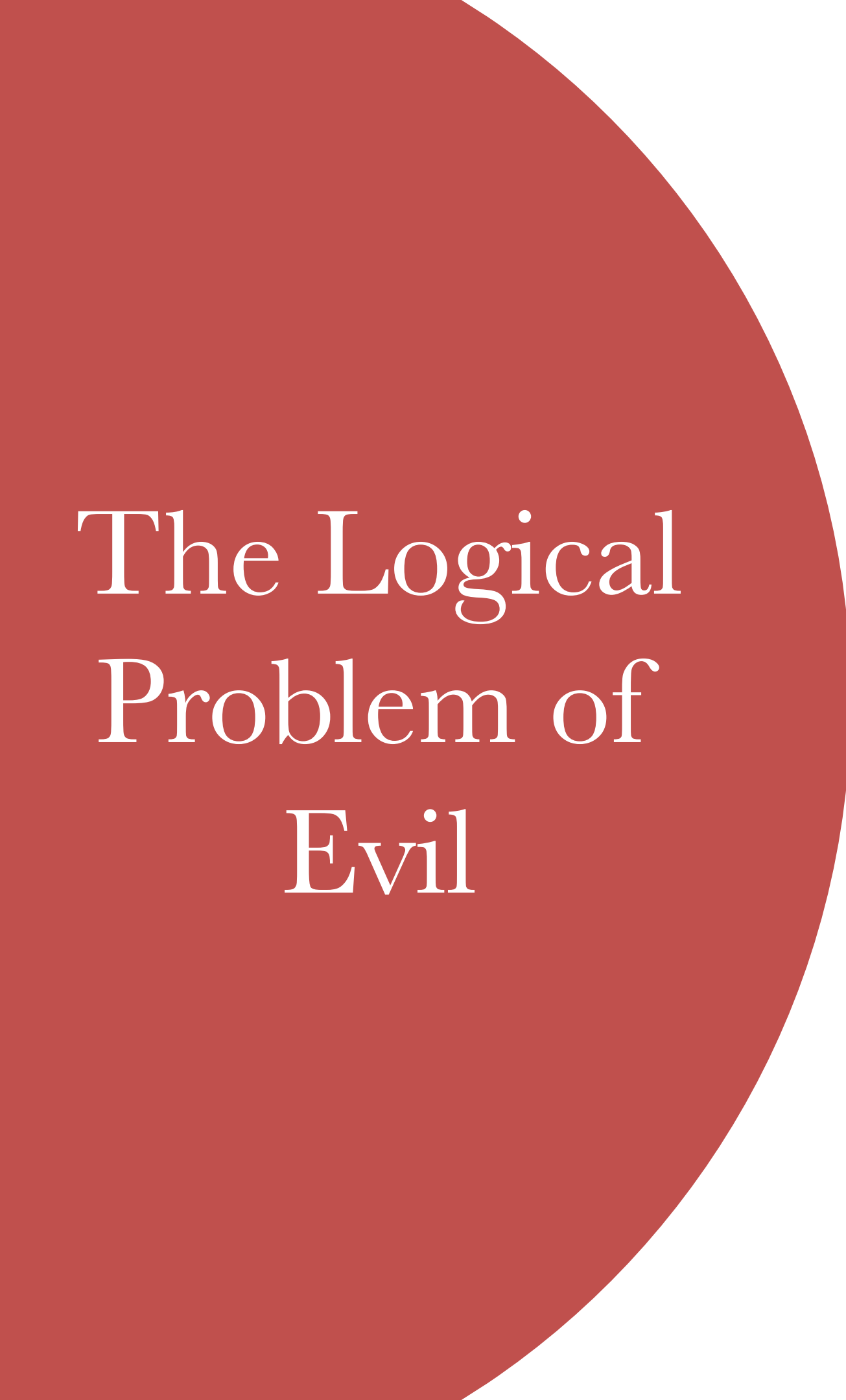
- Suffering comes from God as a punishment against sin.
- Suffering is the result of human sinning against other humans.
- Suffering is redemptive.
- Suffering is a test of faith.
- Suffering is at times mysterious.



The Logical Problem of Evil

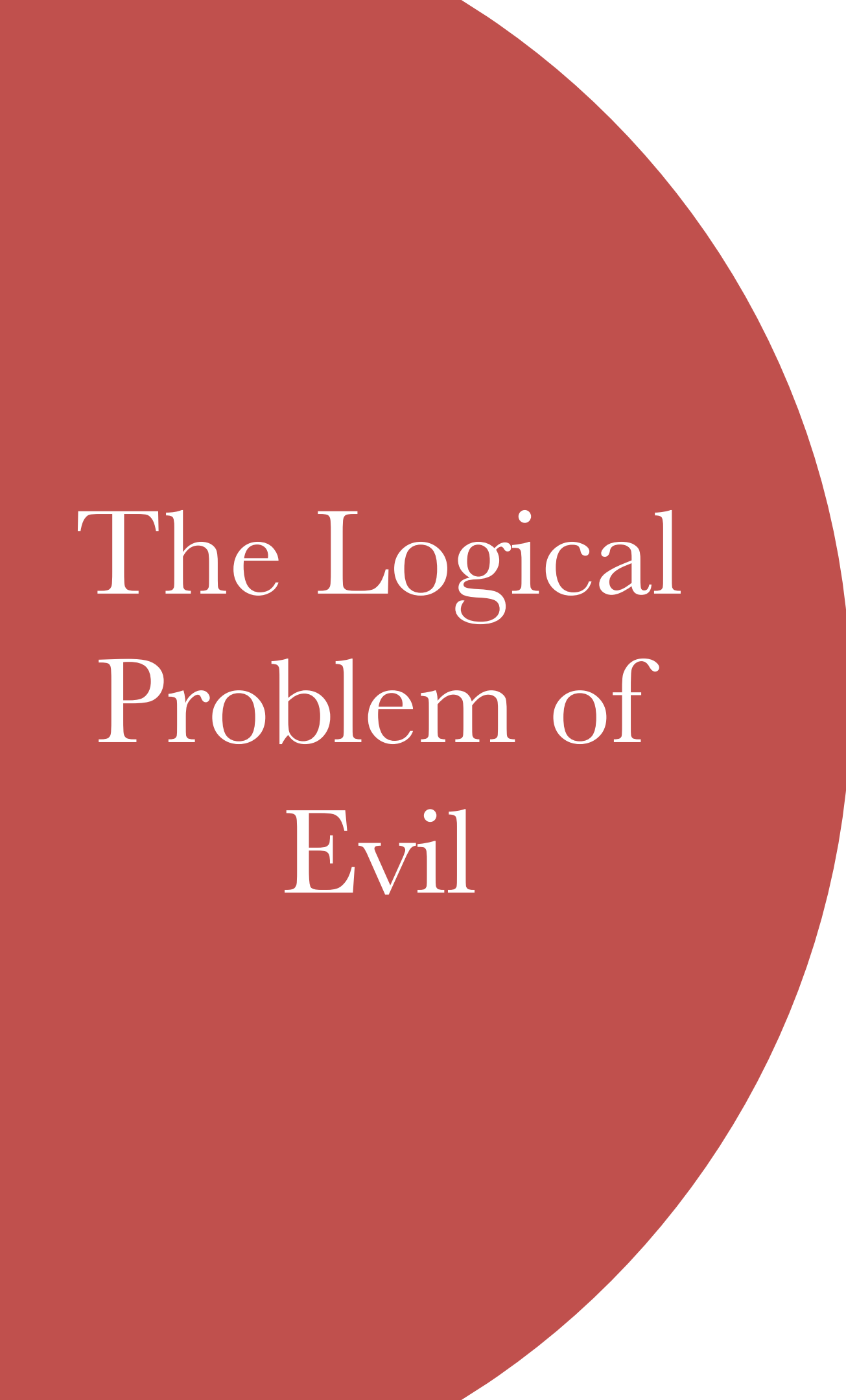
1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-loving.
3. There is suffering.





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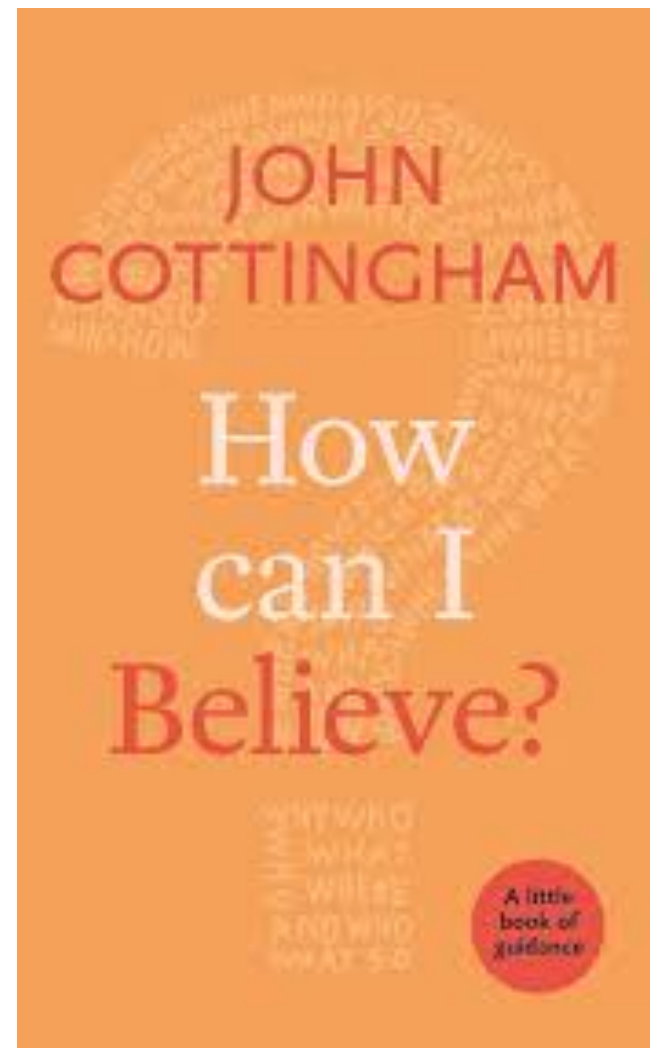


The Logical Problem of Evil

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-loving.
3. There is suffering.
4. The Bible affirms that God reasons are beyond our ken.

John Cottingham

“To believe in God is not to be able to explain why terrible things happen, and why many lives are ruined or tragically cut short. The message of the book of Job is absolutely clear on this point: there is no explanation, or no explanation we can comprehend.”



“To be a believer is not to ‘solve’ this problem, but is something else entirely. It is to hold that the meaning and purpose of our lives . . . is to live in accordance with the ‘sacred’ requirements of justice and compassion. To believe in God . . . is to believe that we are required, by a holy and inviolable power not of ourselves, to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong.”

C. S. Lewis

“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”



Bart Ehrman

“I think we should work hard to make the world—the one we live in—the most pleasing place it can be for ourselves. We should love and be loved. We should cultivate our friendships, enjoy our intimate relationships, cherish our family lives. We should make money and spend money.”

Bart Ehrman

“The more the better. We should enjoy good food and drink. We should eat out and order unhealthy desserts, and we should cook steaks on the grill and drink Bordeaux. We should walk around the block, work in the garden, watch basketball, and drink beer.”

Bart Ehrman

“We should travel and read books and go to museums and look at art and listen to music. We should drive nice cars and have nice homes. We should make love, have babies, and raise families.”

Bart Ehrman

“We should do what we can to love life—it’s a gift and it will not be with us for long. But we should also work hard to make our world the most pleasing place it can be for others. We need to live life to its fullest and help others as well to enjoy the fruits of the land.”

“[This] amounts to a denial of hope or consolation, on any but the most chirpy, squeaky, bubble-gummy reading of the human situation. St. Augustine called this kind of thing ‘cruel optimism’ fifteen hundred years ago, and it’s still cruel.”

UNAPOLOGETIC

**WHY, DESPITE
EVERYTHING,
CHRISTIANITY
can still make
SURPRISING
EMOTIONAL
SENSE**

‘A RARE GEM, A BOOK THAT CARRIES CONVICTION
BY BEING HONEST ALL THE WAY THROUGH.’

JOHN GRAY, *INDEPENDENT*

FRANCIS SPUFFORD

ff

Christianity offers A Way through Death and Its Shadows

- Makes Sense of our Deepest Moral Intuitions
- Motivates to Persevere in Love
- Gives Meaning in Suffering
- Gives us Reason to Trust in God
- Offers a Promise to Rest In