

Introduction

My name is Jeff Myers. I know I look like a regular guy, but I have a serious disorder. It's called simplicism.

Simplicism is not the same as simplicity. Simplicity is a virtue of not making life more complicated than it already is. Simplicism is the drive to be simple-minded about things that I really ought to be more thoughtful about.

In the little hippie town where I live in Colorado, people express simplicism through bumper stickers. Everywhere you go people are plastering slogans on their cars and lamp-posts and bulletin boards, as if a clever little sentence somehow is the last word on the subject, whether it's politics, faith, or the purpose of life.

As Christians, I know we can do better. God expects us to think and reflect well. To know the truth. Not just parts of the truth, but deep biblical truth that fills and nourishes our soul.

In working with young adults, I've realized they have the same problem many of people suffer from, including myself. Some have unanswered questions about their faith. Many more have unquestioned answers, clichés we've picked up that sound good but that, in reality, keep our faith at a shallow level.

It's easy to slip into accepting unquestioned answers, and although there are many we could talk about, my team and I find there to be ten that we've heard repeatedly:

- "God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me."
- "Just have faith."
- "God will heal our land if we humble ourselves and pray."
- "It's just me and Jesus."
- "Love the sinner; hate the sin."
- "Christianity is a relationship, not a religion."
- "Jesus was a social justice warrior."
- "It's not my place to judge."
- "This world has nothing for me."
- "God is good all the time; all the time, God is good."

Maybe one or more of those is sacred to you. I get it. Many of these sayings I've believed and even repeated to lots of other people.

This is a journey to a more thoughtful faith, and I invite you to join me on it. The goal is not to make faith more complicated, but to discover the awesome biblical truths below the surface of the simplistic clichés that sometimes masquerade as thoughtful expressions of faith.

The surest cure for simplicism is thoughtfulness. And these days, I need it more than ever. If you agree, let's take a journey together. As we go, I believe we'll be even more convinced about the Bible's truth.

We'll stop being at a loss for words to share with others. We'll get a fresh vision for church. We'll learn how to act wisely. We'll discover how to speak the truth without coming across as judgmental.

Most importantly, we'll be able to apply the Bible's wisdom to everything. Are you ready?

Chapter 1: "God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me."

As a kid I remember listening to a sermon when the pastor made a controversial point. He sensed that people in the congregation might not agree, so he held his Bible high and said, "If you disagree, take it up with God. God said it; I believe it; and that settles it for me."

Now, I liked church, for the most part. I did get in trouble sometimes. One time, my brother and I even made a gasoline bomb and set it off in the church parking lot. But you'll have to read the rest of that story in the book.

But back to our topic. When I heard people say something like "God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me" it didn't seem that they wanted to go deeper into God's truths. It's that they seemed to treat the Bible mainly as a rule book. "Stop thinking about it; just follow the rules."

Rule books are important. The Bible has rules in it that show us how to live a good life. But rule books don't inspire us. You don't see people curling up with a cup of coffee and studying their car's maintenance manual. Some people might find that interesting. But most of us want to know, "How do I live wisely today? Does my life have purpose? How can I share the truth in a way that others will listen?"

Here's another way we might think about the Bible. A compass. When my children and I were testing for our advanced diving certification, we had to descend 40 feet below the surface and swim in a square, 100 feet in each direction, until we made it back to the group. Visibility was pretty low and within just a few kicks, I couldn't see our group at all. I needed my compass to guide me through the gloom and back to safety.

Throughout history, the Bible has done that for billions of people. 66 books, written over the course of 1,500 years by 40 authors from different cultures and all different walks of life. And yet the Bible conveys one central message, the story of how God created everything, how we humans fell into sin, and how God has offered redemption and is restoring all things.

The Bible's truths have been verified through history and archaeology. Its words have been accurately transmitted through time. And the Bible doesn't ask you to just take it at its word. Unlike any other influential religious book, the Bible invites the reader to examine its truth.

The Bible has been picked apart, banned, and mocked. It has been confiscated and destroyed. Its wisdom changes the world for the good, and that is a threat to those who hold the reins of power and benefit from lies and oppression.

The Bible records many mysteries, but it does not shroud in secrecy the most important revelation in all the world: there is a God who speaks to everyone everywhere about everything.

Seems to me that this is a lot deeper than saying "God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me." I wonder if you agree?

Chapter 2: "Just have faith."

Mark Twain sarcastically defined faith as ‘believing what you know ain’t so.’ Harvard professor Steven Pinker described faith as “believing something without good reason to do so.” And the famous atheist Richard Dawkins said, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is a belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”

If their criticisms were aimed at the Bible, I can understand a little of where they’re coming from. The Bible is full of accounts that defy natural explanation. The parting of the Red Sea. The feeding of five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish. The Bible follows a deeper logic that makes little sense to people who believe that only the natural world exists.

When faith is under attack, lots of people default to talking about faith only as the strength of our belief. People say “Just have faith” as a way to say, “Be strong. Hang in there.”

When I think about faith’s critics and those who treat it in a shallow way, two things come to mind:

First, we ALL place faith in something. Biblically, faith does not mean believing things that don’t match up to reality. It means admitting that God is the greatest reality in the universe, who solves the mysteries of knowledge and existence while bringing healing and purpose to our lives.

Second, faith in God isn’t something we simply have; it’s something we live. The Bible doesn’t tell us to have faith; it tells us to live faithfully. The righteous LIVE by faith, the Bible says.

This doesn’t mean we don’t have doubts. Doubt can even be healthy as long as we put it in its proper place. We have to doubt our doubts as much as we doubt what we are putting our faith in.

The goal isn’t to prove everything we believe 100%. It’s to form beliefs that are true, and that we are justified in holding. The question about faith isn’t whether we can work up strong feelings about it; it’s whether the object of our faith is worthy.

It’s important to look at the stories of people who lived faithfully. Amazing people who invented scientific methods, created the ideas of charity and human rights, abolished slavery, developed world-changing technologies, brought billions out of poverty, and established the modern idea of education.

We think of these people as heroes. They believed by faith, cultivated knowledge through faith, and acted as if their faith were true. The world could not help but be changed as a result.

But they didn’t do anything we can’t do. We have a big decision to make: Will we let ourselves be forced into thinking of faith as a private, unfounded belief, or will we step up and live beyond ourselves in a way that changes the world.

Chapter 3: “God will heal our land if we humble ourselves and pray.”

Recently I flew to Los Angeles California for some meetings and was shocked at how conditions in the city had deteriorated. Everywhere I looked there were homeless camps. I tried to imagine the desperation that might have driven people to that condition. The abuse. The abandonment. The addiction. I was only a few blocks out of the airport before I found myself completely overwhelmed.

Don't you sometimes wish you had some kind of magic power to snap your fingers and fix the problems that leave so many people hurting and in despair?

Many Christians think this way about the Bible. They scour its words for something they can hold God to, as a promise, a kind of spell or incantation.

One of the most common is to recite 2 Chronicles 7:14, “if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Many people see this as a promise from God that he is obligated to fulfill if we do our part, which is to humble ourselves and pray. But I've come to see it as one of the unquestioned answers that could be keeping our faith at a shallow level. Here's why.

There are two kinds of things happening in the Bible. The Bible describes things and it prescribes things. Descriptive examples are things such as God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, or telling about how Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake and survived.

The Bible doesn't just describe what happened in the past, though. It also prescribes things that everyone at all times should do. The ten commandments, for example. And the sermon on the mount. These contain principles that the context makes clear are for all of us, forever.

I think that the promise that God will heal the land was a descriptive one. It was made specifically to the children of Israel, at a certain point in time, for a certain purpose. It wasn't made to us. We are not Israel.

But here's the good news: We don't need to twist God's hands behind his back by holding him to a promise that was not made to us. The testimony of Scripture, especially through the words of Jesus, shows us that the almighty Sovereign of the universe has invited us to ask and promised to answer.

God has told us to pray that his kingdom would come. He has specifically said that he will give us what we need when we pray in Jesus's name. He has promised to forgive our sins in response to prayer and to give us wisdom. Throughout the Bible we are invited to pray, and promised that God will answer.

And in a needy world like ours, that's a lot better than any prayer formula.

Chapter 4: “It’s just me and Jesus”

I just love being out in nature. Ahh. It’s everything I need. Peace. Quiet. Trees. Water. It’s like church! Just me and Jesus in his creation.

I’m just being facetious, of course, but a lot of people where I live in Colorado think this way. They may have a point. All week we put up with inconveniences. Then on our one free day we’re asked to gather with people we don’t know, in a place we don’t feel comfortable, at a time dictated by others, to hear something we’ve already heard from people we aren’t sure we trust ... after which the whole crowd goes out to restaurants acting like nothing even happened. Maybe we really should just go for a hike.

But this “It’s just me and Jesus” mentality misses the whole point of the Christian life.

Church isn’t at the sidelines of a meaningful life. It’s the playing field. It’s where we find true spiritual power, blessing, purpose, and growth.

Listen, I’ve experienced my fair share of what is hard about church—musty buildings, boring sermons, forced smiles, bad coffee. But I’ve also experienced the other side: sincere prayer, comforting hugs, deep worship, and teaching that changes the way I see the world.

First Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Did you catch that? WE are the priests. We aren’t just trying to connect with God for ourselves; we’re supposed to be the ones helping OTHERS connect with God.

For people who get this, it is literally life changing. And I mean literally. One study showed that people who attended church were 18% less likely to die during the study period. And people who attended more than once a week were 30% less likely to die. See, you thought those people were killing you. They’re actually keeping you alive!

When it’s done well, church is a safe space. Not the kind of safe space people look for on college campuses so they don’t have to encounter anything that makes them uncomfortable. Instead, it’s a safe place to embrace struggle. To grow. To rise above the things that keep us down. To GROW.

And to those who think they should just skip church because they don’t relate to the generations gathered there, let me just say four words. You. Need. Old. People. Now that I think of it, let me say four more words. And. They. Need. You.

At the end of the day, the “me-ness” of “me and Jesus” is precisely what I need to be rescued from. I have to admit that I can’t save myself. I have to swallow my pride and see that the path to purpose is outside myself. In the story of life, the biggest dreams are given to characters whose stories are larger than they can tell by themselves. This larger story is the story of Christ’s church.

Chapter 5: “Love the sinner; hate the sin.”

If you’re a Christian looking to not be bothered by non-believers, I know exactly where you should go: church. Less than 20% of Americans attend church. You’ll almost certainly be safe there.

Hopefully you can tell I’m being sarcastic. But it’s true; people are staying away from church in droves. And one big reason why people stay away, according to recent surveys, is that they believe that the people at church will judge them.

If you see it from their perspective, they’re right. Even when Christians try to not be judgmental, they can come across as judgmental. We say things like “We love the sinner, but we hate the sin.” Non-believers don’t hear the first part. They just hear the word “hate.”

I understand what well-meaning people are getting at when they say “love the sinner; hate the sin.” I’ve said it often enough myself. But to be fair, there is more than a whiff of self-righteousness in it. It’s as if we’re saying, “God may be mildly irritated by my sins, but he is really upset by yours.” It implies that others’ sins are worse for them than ours are for us.

The reason I include “love the sinner; hate the sin” in my list of unquestioned answers that Christians should consider abandoning is that it doesn’t reflect the true state of everyone before God.

In the biblical account of the fall, God pronounced a curse on the man and woman along with the serpent who coaxed them into such a shameful state. At first this seems like an overreaction. God lost his temper and decided to forever ruin the lives of his precious children. But it’s more a statement about what happens when we tell God, “Leave us alone.” Without God’s presence, what once had been pleasurable became painful. What had been fruitful became barren. The fall massively affected the world and everything in it.

And it still does. But the good news is that God is a rescuer. It’s as if we found ourselves toppling headlong over a cliff only to find ourselves in the strong grip of the only one who can pull us back to safety.

One of the most powerful things we can do is focus on asking questions. “Who are you? Tell me more about you. What’s your story?” We never want to minimize the seriousness of sin, but we absolutely want to communicate to people that “your sin is how you are, not who you are. You are made in God’s image Jesus makes it possible for us to live lives that are fully pleasing to God.”

When it comes to helping others grow spiritually, my job isn’t to add my judgment to God’s. It’s to share who God is, who we are, and the good news of what Jesus has done for us. Loving God involves loving what God loves. And God loves people. All people, not just those who feel like they’re doing pretty well.

Chapter 6: “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.”

When I was a kid, I went to some churches that were pretty hard core in what you might call “fundamentalist” in a negative way. The sermons I heard were mostly about the Bible’s rules that needed to be followed to avoid “worldliness.” I heard sermons against drinking and smoking and going to movies and playing cards, and women wearing pants instead of only dresses.

So when I was out on my own, I kind of went the opposite direction when I talked about the good news. I would tell people, “Forget about the rituals and rules. Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.” These days it’s a pretty widespread message. Many books and videos communicate that message to tens of millions of readers and viewers.

But I’m starting to think that the “relationship not religion” mantra is an unquestioned answer that I ought to abandon. It doesn’t have to do with the relationship part. I believe that God is relational. God is one God in three persons. Father, son, and Holy Spirit. Relationship isn’t just something God does. It’s something God is.

But when I looked up the definition of “religion” in the dictionary, I was surprised. It means a set of beliefs about the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe.

Christianity surely has those things, doesn’t it? God is creator. God is the ultimate reality. The whole universe is meaningful and so are our own lives. To pit relationship against religion is to highlight Jesus’s unique message at the expense of the Bible’s powerful claims about the reality that situates it.

If what the Bible says about God and about reality is true, then Christianity isn’t just a personal perspective; it’s a worldview. It’s about everyone and everything, everywhere.

Our personal relationship with God is important. It’s an eternal relationship that answers the question, “What happens when we die?” But we can’t just say, “Hey, this is all about me and how I relate to God.” There are lots of questions we need to answer. Who are we? Where did we come from? Why should we be good? How do we live peacefully with others? Those questions are really important and it would be pretty cold-hearted and selfish to ignore them.

From this perspective, there is no reasonable way to avoid thinking of Christianity as a religion. But this is no stuffy religion; in relationship with Jesus we can see the whole world from his viewpoint and proclaim the hope and healing he offers.

As Christians, we want all people to be restored in their relationship with God. But we also want to encourage everyone everywhere to live as if God’s message is true. That means we need to take religion as seriously as we take relationship.

Chapter 7: “Jesus was a social justice warrior.”

Social justice warrior. Few words are as divisive these days. For some, it’s a way of signaling that “People who think like me are the only ones who really care about the poor and oppressed, and Jesus is on our side.” For others, it’s a derisive term for people who self-righteously think that giving lip service to socialist policies and “liking” radical social media rants somehow count as making a difference.

But one thing should be clear to everyone: justice is a real thing and God really cares about it. Justice means setting things right. God loves justice. The Bible is clear about that. In fact, if you aren’t concerned about justice, you should ask yourself whether you have God’s heart for the world. The pursuit of justice flows naturally from hearts reconciled to God.

But was Jesus a social justice warrior? Jesus certainly expressed concern for the poor and the oppressed. He even described his own mission in the words of Isaiah: “to proclaim good news to the poor” and to “set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

As you look at Jesus’s ministry as a whole, the Old Testament reality that gave rise to it, and the ministry of the apostles that followed it, it is clear that Jesus did not come to be a social justice warrior. He came as the son of God to reconcile us to the Father.

Care for the poor and oppressed is the paper on which Jesus’s ministry was printed, but that’s not the point of the narrative. The point of the narrative isn’t radical equality; it is being reconciled to God.

Having been reconciled to God, though, means we gain the power to love our neighbor. And that’s where justice really comes in. A key justice word in the Bible is “shalom.” In shalom we ask, How can we help one another grow as persons and become more complete image bearers of God?

Shalom doesn’t just feed the hungry or rescue the oppressed. It transforms the poor into good stewards who bear fruit. It turns the rescued into rescuers. And it rescues the rescuers from patronizing pride as they realize they are growing and benefiting every bit as much as those they seek to help.

That’s why I’ve started thinking of idea that “Jesus is a social justice warrior” as an unquestioned answer that Christians ought to abandon. It’s not because I don’t care about justice. I very much do. But more and more this term is just a way for us to fit Jesus into our justice agenda rather than follow his.

We are not the politically pure bringing enlightenment to the masses. Rather, we are the redeemed bearing the good news to others who, like ourselves, are hopelessly lost without it.

Chapter 8: “It’s not my place to judge.”

Saying “It’s not my place to judge” made my list of unquestioned answers that Christians ought to abandon. But I understand why people say it.

To start, many of us are confused about the difference between facts and opinions. We are convinced that all moral statements are opinions. Saying “stealing is wrong” is like saying “Vanilla ice cream isn’t as good as chocolate.”

Second, Christians have largely come to believe that only God judges, and so we can’t. Now, I believe that when it comes to helping others grow spiritually, my job is to share the good news, not adding my judgment to God’s. But that doesn’t mean I can’t discern what God says is right and wrong and plainly state it and advocate for it.

Third, Christians have embraced the idea that no one can express judgements about right and wrong without being completely pure themselves. “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone,” they say, quoting Jesus.

But having good judgement is more than just having good manners. If it’s true that God gives us insight into reality, then we can form beliefs based on what is real. In order to make good judgements, they need to match up to what is really real.

It comes down to this. Having justified true beliefs is the basis of having good judgment. And therefore, good judgement is worth sharing.

So why do we face so much disagreement and confusion about moral judgements? It’s not because God is unclear about who he is and what he wants. It’s because God has communicated clearly and we have rebelled.

As Christians we need to inform ourselves so we can have justified true beliefs. We need to be able to express good judgement. Of course, how we do that really matters. We need to ask questions that display curiosity and friendly determination. Asking, not telling, helps people see past our faults—and their own—through the lens of the Bible’s message of restoration.

What it comes down to is this: saying “It’s not my place to judge” is an unquestioned answer because it cuts short vital conversations just when they’re nearing the truth.

Chapter 9: “This world has nothing for me.”

I’m sure you’ve heard Christian worship songs talking about how this world is not our home. Although not entirely wrong, I’ve come to believe this leads us to an unquestioned answer that Christians ought to abandon. “This world has nothing for me” may feel relatable, but how true is it?

Now, I understand why people say it. At first glance, it seems biblical. The Apostle James says, “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

Today, we experience natural disasters, poverty, and disease, but people in James’ time had it much worse. Because of the despair they saw in the world, they began to toy with a philosophy called Gnosticism, which is a belief that puts significant emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material.

Gnosticism was considered by church fathers to be such a threat that they wrote the Apostles' Creed as a line-by-line refutation of it. Yet Gnosticism is still a temptation today. Many secular people think that Gnosticism is what true Christianity is about.

But keeping our focus ONLY on the here and now doesn’t necessarily make things better. A short-term mindset can be damaging, especially in a world where people have access to everything quickly and there is little that is worth keeping forever.

The Bible doesn’t teach that it is the world versus eternity. Rather it teaches us to bring an eternal perspective to bear on everything we do in this world. Christ is not outside culture or above it. He entered it to transform it.

That’s why we can’t be headed for the exits. In a world that is wasting away we ought to promote flourishing. A biblical Christianity is focused on moving people from poverty to prosperity, from disorder to order, from injustice to justice, from ignorance to knowledge, and from sickness to health. In short, we ought to be people who engage rather than escape.

In Christ all things are being made new. Relationships violently ruptured in the fall can be restored. The path to God and eternal purpose can be cleared of brush and followed once again. The Bible says that God has called creation “very good” (Gen. 1:31) and made it clear that we are to spread shalom until he tells us to stop. We can experience peace with God and proclaim it to the generations to come.

Chapter 10: “God is good all the time—all the time God is good.”

I hope you can’t relate to this, but I suspect you can. The last eight years have made the previous years of my life seem like a cakewalk. Abandonment, divorce, depression, struggles with my kids, health scares. At times, it has seemed so out of control.

My problems weren’t nearly as big as Job’s, but I’d recommend that the book of Job be retitled, “God, what the heck?” because that is what I thought many, many times. I didn’t question God’s God-ness, but his goodness? Oh yeah.

You’ve had those moments, haven’t you? You’re minding your own business and suddenly find yourself splayed out awkwardly on life’s pavement. A loved one is gone. Your career path isn’t working out. The sting of betrayal won’t subside. Health is failing. A child reveals a hidden, shocking secret.

In one rough patch I was visiting a new church. The pastor exulted, “God is good” and congregation shouted in reply, “All the time.” The pastor responded, “All the time” and the people cheered, “God is good!” To me, it sucked the oxygen out of the room. In my misery I imagined that those around me were saying more about the kind of week they had than what they really believed to be true.

That’s why “God is good all the time—all the time God is good” made my list of unquestioned answers that Christians ought to abandon. Not because it isn’t true, but because it risks sounding naïve and self-centered at the very moment when our culture is crying out for answers to its pain.

Maybe we should instead focus on those answers:

1. God is purposeful. He didn’t make us to be puppets. But he has arranged things so that when we come to the place where our choices take us, we can see that he was there all along.
2. God created good. God didn’t just make things good, he made the very idea of good itself. We can only know the difference between good and evil because good does exist, and it really exists because of God.
3. God made us free. God does not take away the freedom that makes it possible for us to do evil. Instead, he willingly withholds his own power so we can be free to choose good.
4. God directs us to take responsibility. We don’t have to make things turn out right, but we must act. We can relieve the suffering that he directs us to.

God is indeed good all the time, not just when I like what he is doing for me right now. God’s answer to evil is a person—Jesus. At the cross God declared victory. Our toughest questions may never be answered this side of eternity, but I have learned this: each day is a gift God has given us to bring glory to him and do good to our neighbors.

“Conclusion”

I’m so glad you’ve joined me on this journey in which we became sworn enemies of simplicism; the drive to be simple-minded about things that we really ought to be more thoughtful about.

Our struggle isn’t just against unanswered questions; it’s against the unquestioned answers that keep our faith at a shallow level. Let’s review the ten we looked at:

First, “God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me.” The Bible is an amazing book about a God who speaks to everyone everywhere about everything. It calls for close examination, not blind belief.

Second, “Just have faith.” What counts most is not the bigness of our belief, but the bigness of the God who is there. Faith in God isn’t only something we have, it’s something we live.

Third, “God will heal our land if we humble ourselves and pray.” We don’t need to twist God’s hands behind his back with promises he made to others. He has invited us to pray and promised to answer.

Fourth, “It’s just me and Jesus.” The “me-ness” of “me and Jesus” is precisely what we need to be rescued from. Being in community with other believers is the only way we become spiritually mature.

Fifth, “Love the sinner; hate the sin.” This cliché seems to suggest that others’ sins are worse for them than ours are for us. You and I need to be saved just as much as anyone else. There’s no room for arrogance.

Sixth, “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.” Christianity is no dead religion; in relationship with Jesus we can see the whole world from his viewpoint and proclaim the hope and healing he offers.

Seventh, “Jesus was a social justice warrior.” Jesus came to reconcile us to God, not to affirm anyone’s utopian agenda. In Jesus, we learn to love our neighbor and make wrong things right. That’s where true justice comes from.

Eighth, “It’s not my place to judge.” Uttering this slogan cuts vital conversations short just when they’re becoming meaningful. Asking, not telling is what opens the door to telling the truth.

Ninth, “This world has nothing for me.” The Bible says that God has called creation “very good” (Gen. 1:31) and made it clear that we are to spread shalom until he tells us to stop.

And tenth, “God is good all the time—all the time God is good.” God is indeed good all the time, not only when I like what he is doing for me right now. God’s answer to evil is a person—Jesus.

If you remember nothing else, remember this: the most questionable thing about unquestioned answers is how they make everything about me. Life isn’t about me. It’s about being transformed by Jesus. The Bible’s story moves HIM to the center of reality, and THAT is what gives meaning to my story and yours and the story of everyone.