

stand

CORE TRUTHS YOU MUST KNOW
FOR AN UNSHAKABLE FAITH

ALEX MCFARLAND



TYNDALE

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Stand

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The names of some of the people in this book and the details surrounding their stories have been changed to protect their privacy.

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*This is what the LORD says: “**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

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How to Understand the Core Truths of Christianity

*Much dreaming and many words are meaningless.
Therefore **stand** in awe of God.*

—ECCLESIASTES 5:7

It all started with a green baseball cap.

My friend Mike was wearing it when Professor Harley saw the Bible reference embroidered on the hat—John 3:16. The effect was like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

“Anyone who believes in that Bible crud is a complete idiot,” Dr. Harley said.

Kind and gentle Mike didn’t know how to respond to such a hostile comment. Additionally, the professor had a reputation for tying Christians up in philosophical knots. So the next day Mike asked me to meet the college professor and talk with him about why the Bible is true.

I went gladly.

"I'm warning you, Alex, this guy *hates* Christianity," Mike said when we arrived at the professor's house.

Mike was right. As soon as I walked in the door this 40-year-old man with a long, gray ponytail and wearing a Carhartt jacket bragged, "Give me 30 minutes with any preacher and I can make him doubt that God even exists."

Was that a hello?

"This is my friend I was telling you about," Mike said to Dr. Harley, trying to restore politeness.

"It's nice to meet you," I said to the professor, extending my hand for a greeting.

The professor ignored the offer of a handshake and then looked me over, sizing me up. "Give me a couple of hours and I can turn any Christian into an atheist. Even you."

In 15 years of teaching the Bible and speaking hundreds of times throughout America, I had never met someone so openly angry and rude. I smiled at the professor and said, "Well, you and the devil are in the same business." I let that sink in, then added, "He's just faster."

"What do you mean?"

"In the Garden of Eden, Satan convinced Adam and Eve to doubt God," I explained. "Satan turned them into doubters and agnostics, but it took him only a couple of minutes—"

"So you believe that Genesis stuff," the professor cut in. "Well, this tells me a lot about what kind of Christian I am talking to!"

For the next couple of hours we sat in his home office and talked. Regardless of the conversation topic, the professor kept knocking down Christianity and its followers, calling them "ignorant, uninformed, simpleminded believers." With just as

much determination I kept reminding the professor about the reality of Jesus and of Jesus' love for him personally.

At one point, I leaned across the desk looking him directly in the eyes. "Dr. Harley," I said, "you are obviously very intelligent, highly educated, and you say you're an atheist. So doesn't it strike

Why Study the Bible and Its Doctrines?

1. It is one of God's homework assignments to Christians (2 Timothy 2:15).
2. Knowledge of the Bible helps a person resist sin (Psalm 119:9-11).
3. Believers are told to "contend for the faith" (Jude 3). You must understand the faith before you can present, explain, or defend it (see also 1 Peter 3:15).
4. Jesus commanded believers to study the Bible, because He is its theme (see John 5:39, Luke 24:27).
5. Believers who were known for their study of the Bible get complimented in the New Testament (see Acts 17:10-11).
6. In a world full of error, the Bible is the reliable source of truth (see John 17:17, Psalm 119:142).
7. The Bible provides necessary spiritual nourishment, changing our lives for the better (see Matthew 4:4).
8. Attitude toward God's Word is an indicator of one's love for God's Son (see John 14:15).
9. It is promised that the author of the Bible (the Holy Spirit) will come alongside to teach and tutor the reader (1 John 2:27).

you as odd that for two hours I've listened to you talk about someone who doesn't exist?"

As we continued to talk, my heart went out to this well-educated but misguided man. Finally his soul opened up, and Dr. Harley shared with Mike and me how some unpleasant church experiences as a teenager led him to have doubts about God and then disbelief in the Bible. He dealt with his hurt and anger by trying to squash the faith of other people.

"Okay," I said, "you say there is no God, no afterlife, and we all just die, rot back into the soil, and that's it. Right?"

"Science proves it!" he said.

"Let me ask you something kind of personal. Deep down, do you hope your view is true? I mean, are you glad that this is how things are?"

His answer was surprising. "No one's ever asked me that before. I don't know. Not really. My mother was a Christian. I'd like to think that one day I'll see her again, but that's just false hope. I can't lower myself to accept some primitive Christian beliefs."

As Mike and I walked out the door, the professor said some things that have stuck with me: "In a way, I'm envious of people who can have faith. But what I can't understand are those Christians who never learn anything about what they say they believe. If I ever did convert, I would learn everything possible about God."

Why It's Important to Know Your Stuff

The professor had a point. Many Christians do not know why they believe or what they believe. Not long ago, a survey of "born

again Christians” by the Barna Research Group concluded that Christians are often ignorant about their faith. Even though 98 percent of those surveyed said that their Christian faith is very important in their life, some of the survey’s findings were discouraging. For example:

- Thirty-eight percent believe that if a person is generally good he can earn a place in heaven. (This contradicts the Bible, which says eternal life is “the gift of God”; see Romans 6:23, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:8-9.)
- Fifty percent said that Satan is “not a living being but is a symbol of evil.” (The Bible clearly identifies Satan as a living being, calling him “your enemy”; see 1 Peter 5:8.)
- Thirty-one percent of born again Christians agree with the statement “While He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins, like other people.”¹ (The Bible says that Jesus was perfect; He never sinned; see Hebrews 4:14-15.)

In a world of psychic hotlines, horoscopes, Wicca, and alternative spirituality, Christians must be able to share their beliefs effectively. When a friend has a question about God, the Christian should have an answer. The Bible commands us to know our beliefs so that we will be equipped to represent our Lord (see 2 Timothy 2:15, also 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Not only that, but Christians who don’t know why they believe what they believe are in spiritual danger. Many people who join cults and nonbiblical religious groups once claimed to be Christians. Several years ago I interviewed a former cult leader on a radio program.

The man explained that of the 200 people who joined his

religious organization each month, virtually all of the new recruits had been at one time members of churches.

“We were growing in people and taking in lots of money,” the former cult leader explained. “I didn’t want to rock the boat, but secretly, I could never understand how all these church people didn’t see that our beliefs were exactly opposite, you know, incompatible.”

Our radio interview continued, and by the end of the broadcast my heart was heavy. The man said something that made the evangelist in me really sad:

People gave different reasons for leaving the church, for getting into alternative spiritualities, like us. Some people were fed up with church cliques, and others were burned out on church conflict. But most were just people searching for answers, and they had no understanding of what Christianity was really about. They couldn’t see the discrepancy between the false and the true. We [the cult leaders] used to brag that we basically took in an entire church of ex-Christians each month.²

It is time that we Christians get a solid grasp on Christianity. This book is about six core truths that are taught in the Bible and are central to Christianity. Knowledge of Bible truths is crucial for personal growth and for Christian service. God has given believers throughout history the special job of sharing Christ with their own generation. But to do this, we have to have a solid understanding of the message we are presenting.

Beyond that, it only makes sense that a Christian would want to have a strong knowledge about this faith in which he has

entrusted his soul. Through personal experience and in teaching biblical truth to others, I have seen that learning about the core truths of Christianity leads believers to a stronger relationship with God and passion to tell others about Jesus Christ.

The Bible Is Relevant Today

“I never knew that this Bible stuff would really be so . . . well, interesting.” When a teenager said that to me at an event where I had spoken, I thanked him for making my day.

People sometimes assume that deep, detailed Bible study will be boring. They struggle to see how events that happened centuries ago are relevant to their lives today. Maybe they were made to sit through too many monotonous sermons. I guess a lackluster presentation could make any subject seem dull. But think again before you assume that the content of Scripture is dull or irrelevant. Verses like Psalm 119:93 express the wonderful and lasting impact that come from understanding the Bible:

I will never forget Your precepts,
For by them You have given me life. (NKJV)

The Real Deal

Several years ago when I was still in school, I saw some Izod shirts at the mall—you know, the sharp-looking tennis shirts with the little alligator emblem. I really wanted one, but in the big department store they were kind of expensive. *If they ever go on sale, I thought, I'm going to buy one.*

Fast-forward a couple of weeks. I saw a TV commercial that

promised a big sale with “Computers! Stereos! Household items! Clothing! And more! All at unbelievable prices!” I was convinced—these deals were too good to miss.

At the big sale I was pleased to see a rack of Izod shirts. There were dozens of them in every color you could imagine. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. Izods at a discount meant I could afford to buy two.

I was so proud of my new Izod shirts that I wore them almost every day for over a week. Monday was green shirt day, Tuesday I wore the yellow shirt. Wear and wash, wash and wear. I went to school feeling stylish every day.

Two weeks later I was putting on one of my new shirts when

“Christians don’t necessarily need to hear a lot of new things; they just need to be reminded of some important old things.”

—ANONYMOUS

I noticed that the snazzy little alligator emblem had fallen off. In a hurry, I yelled downstairs, “Mom, is my yellow Izod clean?” As I was putting on my “good” shirt, an amazing thing happened. One sleeve of the yellow shirt fell off. I stared in disbelief

at my precious, less-than-two-weeks-old designer shirt with a sleeve hanging by only a thread. Now the green shirt with the missing alligator looked pretty good. Discouraged that my trendy shirts were falling apart, I rushed off to a family reunion.

At the picnic, I saw my brother-in-law David, who happens to work in the textile industry. I told him about the shirts.

“Let me take a look at the tag in the back of your shirt,” David said.

He let go of the tag he was reading, turned me around, and said, “These are not authentic Izod shirts. We see it all the time

in textiles. What you bought are cheap imitations, and that's why they are coming apart. Alex, you've been ripped off."

Things began to make sense, and I began to feel pretty foolish.

How could elite designer shirts have been priced so inexpensively? And why would exclusive shirts like this be among the odd assortment of items at a big

warehouse sale? This was my first exposure to knockoffs: fake, look-alike products. After another washing, the shirts completely fell apart, and so did my feeling of having scored a good deal.

*"Knowledge of Scripture
is knowledge of Christ,
and ignorance of them
is ignorance of Him."*

—JEROME (A.D. 340-420)³

Authenticity Is Key

Buying phony knockoff shirts was a disappointment, costing me just a little more than \$20. But trusting in a false Savior would be more than disappointing—it would be disastrous. The cost would be beyond calculation. The value of your soul and the length of eternity are clear reminders of the importance of believing *truth*.

We live in a world where millions of people embrace thousands of belief systems. Yet Jesus said that there is only one way for someone to enter heaven—by being “born again” through Jesus Christ (see John 3:3, 14:6). (We’ll discuss this more in chapter 5.)

Millions of people do not have a clear understanding of what it means to be a Christian. And even many who are Christians can’t give a basic explanation about what they believe.

Mordecai Hamm was a Jewish man who became a much talked about Christian leader. Hamm was passionate in his belief that every believer should know the core truths of the Bible and

share them with others. He saw this not as a chore, but as each Christian's privilege. Hamm enthusiastically declared:

No option, no alibi, no excuse! Every Christian has an obligation to a lost world!⁴

In the course of his travels, Hamm taught one young man about the core truth of salvation through Jesus Christ. This most famous convert was Billy Graham, who would eventually preach to more people than anyone else in history—210 million people.⁵

One person, standing on God's truth, can make a difference. Let's look at six core truths that will make a difference in your life.

Lost in Translations

If you walk into a well-stocked Bible bookstore, you'll find at least 20 different versions of the Bible. A person could get lost in rows and rows of different types of Bibles. Some of the common ones are the *King James Version*, the *New International Version*, *The Message*, the *New American Standard Bible*, and the *Revised Standard Version*. In books with Bible verses quoted, the different translations are sometimes marked with tiny little initials that look like this: KJV, NIV, MSG, NASB, or RSV.

Why so many translations? A single word in Hebrew or Greek, the original languages of the Bible, can mean many different things. In English, a good example would be the word *deep*. A "deep" thought would not be translated in the same way as a "deep" swimming pool or a

“deep” blue jacket. A translator would have to think of the best way to communicate the concept of “deep” as it is used in a particular context.

As a result, whenever the Bible is translated into English, translators sometimes choose different English words to represent the Hebrew or Greek concepts. Modern translations use more modern words and different translation theories than the first English version, which was translated 600 years ago.

Consider these three different versions of Philippians 2:3:

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. (KJV)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. (NIV)

Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. (MSG)

They all say the same thing, just in a different style and with different vocabulary. Rest assured that no matter which mainstream Bible you buy, the essence of the gospel remains the same: Jesus is alive!

Notes

Chapter 1: How to Understand the Six Core Truths of Christianity

1. The Barna Group, “Born Again Christians,” <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=8>, May 13, 2005.
2. “Former LDS Leader Concerned over Protestant Embrace of Mormon Beliefs” Truth Talk Live radio broadcast. Truth Broadcasting Network (Winston Salem, N.C., April 11, 2003).
3. Jerome, quoted in Mark Water, *Hard Questions About the Bible Made Easy* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 25.
4. Mordecai Hamm, quoted by Dr. Alvin Reid, North Carolina Conference of Vocational Baptist Evangelists, (Asheboro, N.C., January 2000).
5. Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, “About Us: Biographies,” <http://www.billygraham.org/mediaRelations/bios.asp?p=1>, May 31, 2005.

Chapter 2: Inspiration

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 235.
2. Harold Willmington, *That Manuscript from Outer Space* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 86. See also Earle