

THINK
ACT
BELIEVE
LIKE
JESUS

BECOMING A NEW PERSON IN CHRIST

A COMPANION TO BELIEVE

RANDY FRAZEE

WITH ROBERT NOLAND

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ZONDERVAN

Think, Act, Be Like Jesus

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Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frazee, Randy.

Think, Act, Be Like Jesus : becoming a new person in Christ / Randy Frazee.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-25017-3

1. Subject one. 2. Subject two. I. Title.

AA000.O.A00 2014

000.00—dc23

2014000000

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Cover design: Name goes here

Cover photography or illustration: Name goes here

Interior illustration: Name goes here

Interior design: Beth Shagene

First printing August 2014 / Printed in the United States of America

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The Confession of Unbelief

I have amazing memories of my mom. She came from a very poor family in southwestern Pennsylvania and married my father at eighteen years old. When I was three, they moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where my dad secured a job with Caterpillar, assembling forklifts.

Throughout my childhood, my mother loved and sacrificed so much for my three siblings and me. She spent all of her money, time, and energy on us. I recall that she rarely did anything for herself. So, several years ago, when I was at a place in my life where I had some financial margin, I called my mother on the day after Christmas to tell her I was taking her and my dad on an all-expense-paid trip with our family to the magnificent Niagara Falls, about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Cleveland. I reserved rooms in a turn-of-the-century, opulent hotel on the Canadian side, facing the waterfalls. She was going to be so embarrassed and uncomfortable, believing she didn't belong in a place like this — but I wanted her to have an unforgettable experience.

When I called Mom a few months before the trip date, she told me she wasn't feeling well. Initially, I thought she was just trying to wiggle out of the trip. As the next few months unfolded, though, her illness grew worse, and I really began to worry. I decided to fly to my parents' home a few days earlier than we had been scheduled to arrive there — and only a week before our big vacation.

Three days later, my mother died of advanced pancreatic cancer at the age of sixty-two. The trip was canceled only seventy-two hours before we were to leave. I was finally in a position to do

something for my mother, and I missed it forever by three days. Three days! I was devastated in so many ways. Something changed within me — maybe more of an awakening of what had been there all along. My soul was in crisis. I slipped into a place of despair.

The thing I miss most about being with my mom is laying my head between her head and shoulders. It was the safest, sweetest place on earth. The last two days of my mom's life, when no one else was in the room, I crawled into the bed with her and placed my head in that warm spot of intense love. Tears rolled down my face. I thought I would have had more time. I was trying to soak in a lifetime in only a few fleeting hours.

Be Like Jesus—VIRTUES

Looking back, I now realize the amazing sense of God's timing. In this season surrounding my mother's illness and death, three spiritual giants were mentoring me. Each was individually "schooling" me on the very work now coming to fruition fifteen years later in this book and in the *Believe* Bible engagement experience. But before these resources could go out to help others, God had decided to do some work *in me* first. The biblical word is *pruning*—the process in which God wants to work *through* us, but first must work *on* us. A deeper work takes place in the individual for the greater work to go out to the world — much like a gardener prunes the trees to gain the best harvest.¹

My three spiritual mentors were J. I. Packer,² Dallas Willard,³ and George Gallup Jr.⁴

Here is what my mentors taught me: The Christian life is not primarily an intellectual pursuit; nor is it simply about doing good or engaging in spiritual activity. The Christian life is about who you are becoming for the sake of others. Since Jesus came from heaven to represent us, he also modeled for us the life we were created to live.

Therefore, *the ultimate objective of life by God's design is for us to be like Jesus.*

God's passion is for the virtues of Jesus to appear in our lives. The Bible calls these virtues "fruit." Fruit is external to a tree. It is seen by all and available to taste by all. When delicious fruit appears on the end of our branches, it gives evidence of the health inside. But, ultimately, the value of fruit is for the benefit of others, who grab hold of the fruit of our lives and taste it. Is it ripe, sweet, and delicious, or is it green and rotten, or possibly even artificial?

Paul called these virtues "the fruit of the Spirit." The grape was likely the first fruit to come to the mind of the early Christian, who might have harkened back to the teaching of Jesus about the vine and the branches.

Recently, I watched *Somm*, a documentary about a group of men trying to attain the level of Master Sommelier — the highest level an expert in wines can achieve. Five wines were placed in front of the aspiring contestants. They would swirl the glass, immerse their noses completely inside, and take a deep breath. Then they would take a sip, swish the wine in their mouths, and spit it out in a bucket. From this exercise, they were able to declare the region, variety, date, body, and tannins of the wine. I found the description of the flavor to be fascinating. The word most often used was *hint*. A candidate would say, for example, "This wine has a hint of cinnamon, a hint of oak, a hint of licorice, a hint of blueberry, and a hint of earth."

This may be what Paul had in mind when he gave us the famous list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. The virtues of our lives are contained in a glass, so to speak. The neighbor, the wife, or the friend picks up the glass and swirls it, immerses their nose inside and sniffs, and then takes a sip, swishing it around to then declare, "This wine carries hints of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I am also picking up hints of hope and humility."

The "hint of hope" was missing from my life. And a Christian

can't live without hope. This explained my state of depression. Up to this point in my life, I had been living out of a false sense of hope. For me, as for many people, I "hoped" life here would be good and stay consistent—to be translated as no relationship crises, no divorce, no disease, no job loss, money in the bank, and certainly no deaths of anyone I love deeply. While such a "hope" may hold up for a while, eventually it will disappoint and fail us. God wants to give us a true hope, rising above all earthly matters and seeing us through all our troubles. Clearly, I didn't have this kind of fruit at the end of my branches. And the death of my mother exposed my need.

Here's a quite interesting fact I learned through this: You can't grow in the virtue of hope by merely trying to be more hopeful. The same is true of all the other fruit—*By golly, I am going to just be more joyful tomorrow*. While it is certainly essential to have a vision for change and growth, it will not come into our lives by simply willing it to be true.

Think Like Jesus—BELIEFS

To find the solution to *being like Jesus*, I went back to my mentors. I found becoming like Jesus requires we *think like Jesus*. Accomplishing this is far harder than it might seem. All three men said the same thing to me, independent of one another: *It is not enough to believe something as the right answer; you must believe it as a way of life*.

The journey of belief begins in the head, but it must migrate twelve inches south to the heart to make a difference in our lives. Why? Because we live from the heart. We live consistent with the beliefs embraced in our hearts.⁵

"As he thinks in his heart, so is he."⁶

The writer did not say, "As he thinks in his *mind*," but rather, "As he thinks in his *heart*." There is a vast difference. Consider the context for this verse:

*Do not eat the bread of a miser,
Nor desire his delicacies;
For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.
"Eat and drink!" he says to you,
But his heart is not with you.
The morsel you have eaten, you will vomit up,
And waste your pleasant words.⁷*

Suppose you spend the night at the house of a person you do not know well. Before he leaves in the morning for work, he tells you to help yourself to whatever is in the refrigerator. So you do. When he comes home, he gives you the cold shoulder. You ask him if there is anything wrong, but he answers, "No." Later in the week, you hear through the gossip chain of friends that, in fact, he was angry with you because you raided his refrigerator. You respond to your friends, "This can't be. He told me it was okay." After your friends chuckle a bit, one quips, "It doesn't matter what he *says*; everyone knows he's a miser. He can't help himself."

Your host knows the proper thing is to offer up the contents of his fridge. However, when it comes right down to the truth, he really doesn't embrace this notion, for in his heart, he is a miser. He lives consistently with the values and principles of a begrudging host. He just can't help himself. Why? Because the belief resides in his heart.

Jesus reinforced this axiom when he said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."⁸

If Jesus were speaking to us today, he might say, "Show me your checkbook or credit card bill, and I will tell you what you truly believe." Your money follows the central beliefs of your heart. You can go to a financial management seminar and understand every principle in your head, but what you believe in your heart is what counts and what ultimately determines your spending, saving, and investment habits.

If you struggle to live your beliefs, then you don't really believe them. You might understand; it might be a requirement to give

intellectual assent in the community in which you hang out. But the belief has not yet taken up residence in your heart.

Claude Harmon, winner of the 1948 Masters Tournament, where the take-home prize was \$2,500, trained all four of his sons into arguably becoming the best golf instructors in the world. My next-door neighbor plays on the PGA tour, and he switched to Butch Harmon last year. He has already won three tournaments this season, with earnings at right around \$4 million, before sponsorships. Claude once told his sons, “A *good* golf instructor can spot the ten things wrong with a golfer’s swing; a *great* golf instructor can identify the one causing the other nine.”

The same is true in the Christian life. A good spiritual coach might be able to spot the ten things wrong with the way I approach life, and even my absence of hope; a great spiritual coach can spot the one thing causing the other nine.

The one thing is almost always a belief — something I don’t understand or have never been taught about the Christian life, which is certainly a systemic issue among believers today. Or there is something I believe in my head to be true or right, yet it doesn’t reside in my heart, which then undermines my experience of hope.

The journey of belief begins with the confession of unbelief.

This statement is what my mentors were talking about. You have to help people discover this truth, and then they must confess it to themselves and to a few significant others, if they ever want to truly live the Christian life. I know I certainly had to.

So I then asked myself, “What do I *not* believe? What is the cause of this hopelessness?”

As a result of my work with my mentors, I’ve come to see there are, and always have been, ten essential driving beliefs of orthodox Christianity. Which of these ten was a primary struggle for me, thus hindering my experience of hope?

Dr. J. I. Packer — my “Butch Harmon,” my “Master Sommelier” — had some keen insight. Two primary beliefs drive biblical hope. The first is the key belief about the promise for the future of all

believers. I will call this belief *eternity*. The second key belief is in the One who is making the promise. I will simply call this our belief in *God*. Packer suggested I either (1) didn't understand or truly embrace what Christ taught about eternity, or (2) I didn't really understand or trust the One making the promise, namely Jesus.

It didn't take long to pinpoint my answer. What did take a while, however, was to admit the reality to myself, but I finally did. I remember the first time I said it out loud to myself: *"I don't believe in heaven."*

Now, please read this next section carefully before you cast me out as an infidel. I have officiated hundreds of funerals and delivered dozens of sermons on the sweet topic of heaven, believing in my head this is the right answer. But I didn't own the truth in my heart. I wanted to; I just really didn't.

Please know this is a raw but necessary honesty to communicate this premise for us all.

The idea of, in the moment of her death, my mother's spirit exiting her diseased body and going up to heaven to reside with Jesus, along with all those who had gone before — this was just too fantastic an idea for me. I have no mental precedent for such an event. It would certainly help if a few people came back and held a campfire Q & A on the topic. I'm talking not about near-death experiences, but about people who have been gone for a few years and then came back to have a serious conversation or give a presentation about their experience. And since I'm being completely transparent here, living as a disembodied spirit, possibly with wings and singing worship songs 24/7 forever, are just not very appealing ideas to me.

The truth is, if I was given three choices, as in ...

1. Go to heaven
2. Go to hell
3. Stay on earth and continue to experience life as I'm currently experiencing it

... I would choose #3, by far! I would choose heaven second. Because singing “Kumbaya” for eternity is only slightly more appealing than burning in fire.

All right, I said it. I admitted my struggle with eternal hope. Now what? Because I was the senior pastor of a large church, I felt I should share this with my congregation. Bad idea.

I found out that church is a good place to confess what you *believe*, but not a good place to confess your *unbelief*. One woman, a leader in the community and a member of another church, went to the elders and suggested I resign or take a long sabbatical. The truth is, I never felt more spiritually alive. There is something quite liberating about entering a raw dialogue with God, just like the psalmist did. Not only can God handle it; he invites it! Most churches — well, not so much.

We need to give Christians today the same opportunity Jesus gave the centurion who said, “I do believe some things; help me with what I don’t believe.”⁹ I don’t think we’ll ever see a vibrant revival in Christianity until we create safe places for Christians to confess their unbelief, because the true heart confession of what we don’t believe is the only path to true belief in our hearts.

Many who grow up in the church hit a crisis of unbelief in their teen years. Because a lot of Christian parents and church leaders can’t bear to hear about doubt swimming around in their children’s minds, too often young people keep doubt to themselves. This faith dilemma can also become magnified during their early years of life at a university. In the silence, little by little, we lose them. Unspoken struggles morph into reasons to no longer believe. The pattern — when they leave home, they also eventually leave their faith.

Instead, we should invite this confession of unbelief. In my experience, the journey of belief from head to heart is almost always coupled with and fueled by a season of doubt in which a young adult is making a decision to embrace or reject the faith of their parents. We need to create an environment in the home

and the church where they are encouraged to speak their doubts out loud. When they do, our response should be, “Great! We were looking forward to this day.” With the mouth being halfway from the head to the heart, the confession of unbelief or doubt means the teen or young adult is also halfway home to truly owning their personal faith.

Act Like Jesus—PRACTICES

Now what should I do? I can’t get stuck here. Time to *act like Jesus*. This is where *spiritual practices* and disciplines enter in, such as worship, prayer, Bible study, engaging in community, offering my resources, and sharing my faith.

In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard introduced me to an important principle: *Spiritual practices are the exercises engaged in with the Spirit, whereby we slowly move a truth of God from our head to our heart.*¹⁰

Even spiritual disciplines designed to serve others turn around and minister to us. The perpetual act reinforces the validity of a biblical belief and gives us an experience with the power of the truth, not just with book knowledge.

Recent research reveals that the number one Christian practice to catalyze spiritual growth is *Bible engagement*, with no close second.¹¹ This is where I began in my quest for hope.

I opened the Bible with a fresh perspective to discover God’s vision for eternity, for the future on which one builds hope. No denominational ax to grind and no sermon to prepare. This was deeply personal. I was on a treasure hunt to discover and experience lasting hope made available to me through Christ.

Five fresh discoveries resulted. Since I have a degree in theology and another in biblical studies, you may think I would have had these down pat — but I didn’t. I knew about them, but their collective reality had not yet settled in.

Discovery #1: God isn't finished when we die. He takes care of us and holds on to us, but there is still more to come. All the really good stuff starts unfolding at the return of Christ. Now it makes sense that John would end the last book of the Bible with the phrase, "Come, Lord Jesus."¹² John had been given an IMAX 3D audio/visual encounter with what is to come and wanted to hurry up and get there. Maybe if I had seen what he saw, I would have voiced the same prayer.

Discovery #2: The end place is not *up there*, but *down here*. God is going to do what he did in Genesis 1–2 all over again. The first two chapters of the Bible bear an uncanny resemblance to the last two chapters of the Bible. God is going to create "a new heaven and a new earth."¹³ We will live on the new earth—a very real place. I now have a mental model for this paradigm. As I am writing this chapter, I am on a cruise ship sailing from Belize back to Houston. The sun is bright; the water is blue; and the breeze is gentle. Just yesterday, I was with my wife, son, and daughter-in-law in a magnificent rain forest on the island of Roatán in Honduras. We are heading home to the beautiful hill country north of San Antonio, Texas, where God did some of his finest work. While I love earth living, I believe God can do again what he once did—remove all the bad stuff—and I am ready to make the jump right now. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Discovery #3: God is not staying *up there*, but he is coming *down here* to be with us, like he did with Adam and Eve, to take walks in the cool of the day.¹⁴ I feel the presence of God in my life—I really do. I pray almost nonstop. However, having God actually here with us is a dramatic improvement, if you ask me.

Discovery #4: We are going to receive new bodies—im perishable ones. No more disease, and no more death. I don't know about you, but I am also hoping for a few other modifications—a little divine "nip and tuck" here and there.

Discovery #5: The garden, from which Adam and Eve were escorted away, is at the center of a grand new city. The garden has been expanded, however, to accommodate the number of residents. Let me share the description from John's vision:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"¹⁵

Let's keep reading a bit further:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.¹⁶

A river containing not just water but the water of life — clear as crystal — flowing from the throne of God. Now, this just might be something to see! This river flows right down the middle of the street. On each side of the water is a tree — not just any variety of tree, mind you, but the tree of life from the original garden of

Eden, bearing fruit to give eternal life. This could be magnificent and quite helpful — free and unlimited access to the fruit of the tree Adam and Eve ignored. We bite into it, and it has an amazing taste. We notice a *hint* of eternity with every bite.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is nowhere to be found. We made our choice on the old earth, and now this tree has no purpose. The serpent has been locked up forever, no longer having access to the garden. Yay, God!

And then it dawned on me. This great river flowing from the throne of God will certainly rival Niagara Falls. So it turns out the trip with my mother has not been canceled after all, but just postponed. And the trip is paid for in full, not by her son, but by the Son of God. And my mother will not be able to wiggle out of this one by dying. Death has been thrown into the lake of fire, never to bother us again.

I don't really get disembodied spirits floating on clouds, getting angels' wings, or working to earn them, like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*. But I do get this vision and also now want it. I really think, from my heart, Jesus was telling us the truth about this eternity, this hope of heaven.

I believe ... I believe!

I believe from my heart that the vision is true, because I believe the One who makes the promise is trustworthy. He has gone on ahead to prepare a place for us — not a few days in a rented hotel room facing the falls, but a permanent place by the river of life.

So while we wait in hope as he prepares a place for us, he is also *preparing us for that place*. He's pruning us, working in us and on us, and I am grateful he is.

You know, God wants to prune you as well, if only you will let him. He wants to work in you to create a deeper work. God doesn't do this to pick on you or to pay you back for being bad. He has a vision for you to become like Jesus. This is truly the best way to get the most out of this life. Our good God wants this for you and for me. For our own sake? Sure. But the real motivation of a life of

love is “for the sake of others.” Your family and friends will benefit greatly from tasting the fruit of your life produced by the Spirit. A bouquet of love, joy, and peace; an aroma of patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness; a hint of gentleness, self-control, hope, and humility.

I have discovered over my forty years of following Christ that I am often willing to shortchange myself on experiencing the best he offers me. Maybe I don’t feel like I deserve it. Maybe I am just okay with settling for the status quo. However, when it comes to becoming like Jesus for the benefit of my wife, four children, grandchildren, neighbors, and others, I find great motivation. I want to do my part to provide the kind of community God envisioned for us when he created us in the first place. I want to pay forward what he has first given to me. I want to love because he first loved me.¹⁷

If you have any interest in this kind of life, this book is for you. As you turn the page to part 1, you will begin your journey in the ten key beliefs of *thinking like Jesus*. The goal is to renew your mind in these key truths found throughout the pages of the Bible.

In part 2, we will probe the ten key practices of the Christian life. Here you will be invited to the adventure of *acting like Jesus*. Engaging in spiritual disciplines not only aids us in expressing devotion to God and love for our neighbors; it also helps us move the key beliefs from our head to our heart.

Then in part 3, we will take a close look at each of the ten key virtues. Possessing these qualities “in increasing measure,” as Peter invites us to pursue them, will move us inch by inch, day by day, toward *becoming more like Jesus*.¹⁸ And living like Jesus is absolutely the best way to live — now and forever.

In part 4, the attention is turned toward you. My heartfelt desire is that one day you will tell your own story, just as I have in this introduction. As people “read your story,” mostly revealed in the way you live differently in their presence, they will also want

to think, act, and be more like Jesus. This is the goal of this book and of the Christian life. Nothing more; nothing less.

If we never meet each other in this life, I look forward to seeing you in the next. You will be able to find me by the great river. Stop by. I would love to introduce you to my mom.

PART 1



Think Like Jesus

What Do I Believe?

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

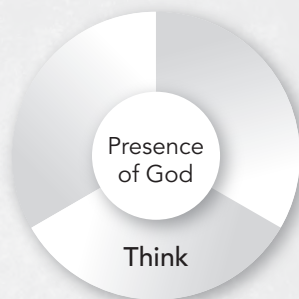
COLOSSIANS 2:6–8

When Christ saves us and we are grafted into his vine and ushered into his kingdom, the Spirit of God, the presence of God, comes to live within our hearts. He is now the center of our lives. Christ is, so to speak, the hub of the wheel, now creating movement in us, for him.



Every thought, action, and virtue produced from our renewed and redeemed mind and heart is born from and empowered by the very presence of God. He is the origin and catalyst for this mighty momentum available in our lives.

We begin this individual revolution, this spiritual rotation, with thinking like Jesus, with believing like Jesus.



So we must begin by asking, “What are the key beliefs of Christianity that, when embraced in the mind and the heart, create true change in our individual lives, in the church, and in the world?”

Throughout the history of the church, thoughtful students of Scripture have identified the biggest ideas. These central beliefs have unified and empowered the church over

the centuries. While there are multiple views within each of these topics, there is a body of truth all Christians embrace. This unifying content draws together followers of Jesus from all times, all ages, and all places on our globe.

Over the course of the next ten chapters, we'll focus on the top ten key beliefs of the Christian life.¹ While a myriad of beliefs and truths are presented in the Bible, these beliefs are, in my opinion (and based on my aforementioned work with Packer, Willard, and Gallup), the top ten themes affecting our spiritual development. Within each topic, we will address three areas:

1. **KEY QUESTION:** What life question does this belief answer?
2. **KEY IDEA:** What is the unifying concept of this belief that most Christians embrace?²
3. **KEY APPLICATION:** What difference does this make in the way I live?

Your first goal is to read each belief to *understand* it. Once you do, you need to ask yourself honestly if you then also *believe*. Do you believe it enough to take such truth down deep into your heart? If the answer is yes, the remaining step is to simply *live it* from the power source of God's presence in your life.

God

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:14

A little girl in kindergarten was drawing a picture when her teacher walked up to her desk to take a look. She asked the child, “What are you drawing?” The bright-eyed girl quickly responded, “God.” The teacher smiled and then said, “Well, honey, no one actually knows what God looks like.” The child looked up from her work and confidently quipped, “Well then, they’re about to!”

This little girl had no doubts at all as to whether God exists; rather, she was now going to show the world what he looked like to her. This is exactly where we must begin in examining our belief in God — not with, “Does he exist?” but with, “Who is he to me?”

Theologian A. W. Tozer wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ Why? Because this mind-set — or absence of it — will drive all we are and all we do.

KEY QUESTION: “Who is God?”

Any discussion or teaching regarding this big idea will have to start with the question, “Who is God?” The Bible’s very first words are, “In the beginning God ...”² Our very lives, as a part of this creation story, also begin with God as our Creator.

The story of the world’s beginning has no hint of defense. No

language flirting with a desire to prove. No attempt to allow for anything other than this overarching truth being true. The entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation is written on the assumption there is a God — the constant focal character of each story.

The apostle Paul writes, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”³

From Gallup’s first poll in 1944 to its 2011 poll, Americans who believe in God have stayed inside the 90th-percentile range. Though declining somewhat, the affirmative answer has stayed strong as an overwhelming majority.⁴

So our central question here is not, “Is there a God?” but “Who is the one true God?”

Joshua 24 describes a powerful moment when Israel’s leader calls all the tribes together. Joshua is coming to the end of his life and wants to challenge the people to stay true to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After he rehearses God’s powerful intervention on their behalf and his protection of them, he offers this challenge:

*“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*⁵

Scripture makes it clear that there have always been, and will always be, other gods that people choose to follow. God freely talks about his competition, if you will, for our attention. He allows us the choice.

Here is the declaration God wants us to make:

**KEY IDEA: I believe the God of the Bible
is the only true God—
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

Throughout the Old Testament, the clarion call is for belief in the oneness of God. The *Shema* (Hebrew for “hear”) forms the belief without mincing words: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”⁶ Judaism and the Christian faith are rooted in monotheism — one God. This idea stood in radical contrast to all the other religions of the day. Israel’s neighbors had come to accept scores of gods, each with their own influence, limitations, and petty self-interests.

Yet, as we turn the page to the New Testament, the names of what seem to be three deities emerge — each declaring to be God — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three are mentioned and appear throughout the Old Testament era, but their distinctive identity and presence invade the life and times of the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul addresses the three persons in one sentence: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

At Jesus’ baptism, we see all three present simultaneously, playing a role in the work of redemption.

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ ”⁷

How do we reconcile this mathematical equation of 3 = 1? Throughout church history, clarity developed on what this did not mean:

- God is not three separate gods (tritheism; modern-day Mormonism)
- God is not one God who manifests himself in different roles or modes (modalism; Oneness Pentecostalism)
- Jesus is not subordinate to God the Father (subordinationism; modern-day Jehovah's Witness)

Yet there is something about the nature of God we are missing. Theologians invented the word *Trinity* (a word not used in the Bible) to capture God's essence — three persons who share a being, or fundamental nature. Throughout the centuries, students of the Bible have come up with analogies to get at the heart of the nature of God as a Trinity and to make it a more accessible and practical concept. The following analogy has helped me in developing a practical concept for the nature of God and in understanding what it means to be made in God's image. Of course, all analogies regarding the Trinity fail or break down at some level, so hold this one lightly. But I hope this offers a strong visual for you, as it has for me.

Christians embrace the doctrine of the Trinity as bedrock to our faith. However, not all Christians have a common understanding. I know not all Christian thinkers will embrace my analogy, and that's okay. I include it because it has helped me immensely to see in my daily life the power and practicality of this elusive doctrine. Give me a chance to explain.

You may think I'm splitting theological hairs, but reflecting on this is important on so many levels. For one, the Bible tells us we were created in the image of God as a community: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness . . . So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'"⁸

The one true God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — created humans in their image as a community. Look again at the verses above. The image of God is in Adam and Eve together. They are not two separate beings — Eve came out of Adam — yet they are

distinct persons who can be addressed individually. And we are told the two have become one.⁹ Our true nature is like God. We were not only created for community; in our original design we are a community. We are; therefore I am.

Of course, our unity as a community was fatally injured when Adam and Eve sinned. Selfishness versus others-ness now reigns in our flesh, making it hard for us to grasp our intended nature. This is what Christ came to restore.¹⁰ When we enter a relationship with God through Christ, we are placed in the body of Christ.¹¹ We, though we are many, become one.¹² Imagine everyone who trusts Christ cramming into a huge hula hoop. This is not the same hula hoop as God, but the rebuilding of the hula hoop of Adam and Eve lost in the garden. Christ is restoring our reflection of the nature of God that was lost in the garden of Eden. Now you can understand why relationships are so important to God. All the principles of the Bible, Jesus said, can be placed under “loving God” or “loving neighbor.” Relationship! I invite you to rethink the phrase “love your neighbor as yourself.” Maybe in God’s design, this means your neighbor is a part of what makes up your complete self.

KEY APPLICATION: What difference does this make in the way I live?

If we actually believe this truth about God, not only in our head (understanding) but also in our heart, how can it guide the way we live?

If we embrace the God of the Bible as the one true God, these principles will direct us:

Because God is God ...

- I am not.
- I can be sure he is in charge and in control,
- I want to know and follow his will for my life.

If we embrace the threeness of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we will observe how they treat each other and seek to emulate these principles in our relationships with each other.¹³

Because I was created in the image of God as, and for, community ...

- I recognize the full personhood of others and respect boundaries.
- I look out for the rights, preferences, and comfort of others.
- I value and enjoy others.

For any situation, relationship, or decision we face, we can resolutely apply these principles to guide us. The results, over time, will lead to blessing in our own souls in the form of fruit such as joy and peace, and we will express our actions outwardly for others to enjoy in the form of fruit such as love and kindness.

For almost four decades, this one true God has guided my life. I have no backup plan; for me, it's all on Jesus. To the extent I have been willing to learn about God, and to get to know him and trust him, he has faithfully guided me in this same path of blessing. While I have certainly endured many difficult circumstances throughout my life, he has been my comfort and strength, my Savior and guide, in all things.

So, what do you believe? Who is the one true God? He gives you the freedom to choose what you believe.