





What's Wrong with Me?



could take you back to the very place where I lost my faith in God. I was 14 years old.

At Prospect High School in Mount Prospect, Illinois, the biology classroom was on the third floor in the northwest corner of the building. I was sitting in the second row from the windows, third chair from the front, when I first learned about Darwin's theory of evolution.

REVOLUTIONIZED BY EVOLUTION



This was revolutionary to me! Our teacher explained that life originated millions of years ago when chemicals randomly reacted with each other in a warm ocean on the primordial earth. Then, through a process of survival of the fittest and natural selection, life forms gained in complexity.

Eventually, human beings emerged from the same family tree as apes.

Although the teacher didn't address this aspect of evolution, its biggest implication was obvious to me: If evolution explains the origin and development of life, then God was out of a job! What did we need God for? Life was just the natural result of the random interaction of chemicals.

To my mind, this was great news! Finally, here was a rational basis for atheism. If evolution explains life, then the first chapters of the Bible must be mythology or wishful thinking. And if that were true of the first chapters, why not the rest? Jesus could not have been God. Miracles aren't possible; they're just the attempts by pre-scientific people to make sense out of what they couldn't understand but which now science can explain.

For the first time, I had a rational reason to abandon Christianity.

BORED BY RELIGION

Not that I'd ever really been a Christian.

My parents believed in God and had done their best to try to spark spiritual interest in me. When I was a kid, they brought me to a Protestant church, where I would struggle to stay awake during the 20-minute sermons. I didn't understand the rituals, I couldn't relate to the organ music, and I quickly concluded that religion was a waste of an otherwise perfectly good Sunday.

When I was in junior high, my parents enrolled me in confirmation class. This meant that one day a week after school I was forced to sit in the church's airless basement and go through a series of classes.

I can't recall learning much about the Bible—or about Jesus, for that matter. Mostly, I remember having to memorize things like the Ten Commandments and then stand and recite

them. Nobody knew them well; we sort of bluffed our way through as the pastor would prompt us. It was mind-numbingly dull. I don't remember anything that I was forced to commit to memory back then, although I do have vivid memories of the pastor lecturing us and telling us sternly that we didn't have enough "diligence." I didn't even know what that was, but apparently we were bad for not having it.

GRADUATING FROM CHURCH

When the time came to be formally confirmed and made a member of the church, we were told in advance the kind of questions we would be asked so that we'd know the answers. I didn't want to go through with this because, if I had *any* faith in God at the time, it was hanging by a slender thread. To me, God was irrelevant, mysterious, and a stern disciplinarian who, if he existed, was probably mad that I lacked "diligence."

On the other hand, I wasn't too excited about the idea of standing up to my parents and saying, "No thanks, I'm not interested in being confirmed, because I think your God is probably just a fairy tale." My dad would have gone ballistic and my mom would have freaked out. I didn't need that. If there were no God, then what would be the harm in going through some meaningless ritual?

So I went through the confirmation ceremony. Afterward, we got a stack of pre-printed envelopes so we could give money to the church. That, I figured, was probably what was really behind the whole confirmation scam—and probably behind all of organized religion. But confirmation had its advantages: I figured that my confirmation ceremony was actually my graduation ceremony—I had graduated from church. Now I was on my own. My parents stopped dragging me to church on Sundays, and I was happy to sleep late. I had done the religion drill. Time to party!

LOOKING FOR LOVE

After that day in biology class, I had even more reason to party. After all, I'd figured out that God did not exist. And that meant I was not accountable to him. I would not have to stand before him someday and be judged. I was free to live according to *my* rules, not his dusty commandments that I had been force-fed in confirmation class. To me, all of this meant that nobody else really mattered unless they made me happy.

But there *was* someone who mattered—and who made me happy. Her name was Leslie, and we met when we were 14 years old. On the day we met, Leslie went home and told her mother, “I’ve met the boy I’m going to marry!”

Her mother was condescending. “Sure, you did,” she said. But Leslie didn’t have any doubts, and neither did I.

We dated on and off during high school, and after I left home to attend the University of Missouri, we maintained our relationship through the mail. We became convinced that there was nobody else we would ever be happy with. Within a year, Leslie moved down to Missouri, and we got engaged. We decided to get married in a church because . . . well, that’s where people get married, isn’t it?

Besides, Leslie wasn’t hostile toward God, as I was. She wasn’t opposed to religion, especially for other people. For herself, though, God was just another topic she had never taken the time to seriously explore.

LIVING IN HIGH GEAR

After I finished college, we moved to a high-rise apartment not far from Tribune Tower in downtown Chicago. Leslie was busy with her banking career. I was beginning to climb the ladder at the *Chicago Tribune*, where my internship had led to a permanent job as a reporter.

That's when my life power-shifted into high gear. If I had a god at that time, it was my career. I loved seeing my name in print, and I thrived on the cutthroat environment, the adrenaline rush of deadlines, and the get-the-story-at-any-cost mentality.

I was doing what I had always dreamed of: traveling around the country; doing radio and TV interview shows; writing a book; winning awards. I had *made* it! I was on the fast track to the top of my profession, and I wasn't even 30 years old.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?

The power I had was better than any high I could get off drugs or alcohol. There were times when I used that power to help people. I remember doing a Thanksgiving Day feature about a poor family on Chicago's West Side. The two young sisters didn't even have a coat, and only one sweater for the two of them. During the biting Chicago winter, one little girl would wear the sweater halfway to school, then the other would wear it the rest of the distance.

After my article appeared, big-hearted people from around the city showered the family with gifts and money. I went back to visit them on Christmas Eve and found their home overflowing with presents—and their closet so stuffed that it looked like the coat department at Nordstrom's. And all, I told myself, because of my article.

But after a while, I noticed that I really didn't care about other people. I once interviewed a grieving woman whose young daughter had been raped and murdered. As she poured out her pain, I was thinking, "Wow! These are great quotes! And I'm the only reporter who's got them!" I didn't care about her daughter or her despair; I was after a front-page byline and another bonus from the boss.

Other people noticed my hardening heart. Once I covered a trial in which a teenager testified how a gang had lined up him, his brother, and a friend against a wall and then, one by one, shot them point-blank in the head. The two others died instantly; somehow, this teenager had survived. At least, he survived long enough to point out the killer in court. According to a doctor's testimony, it was only a matter of time before the witness himself would die from his injuries.

After the trial was over, the prosecutor let me interview the teenager for a feature story. I was excited—I knew I had a front-page exclusive. I was so stoked about beating the competition to the story that I had a big grin on my face as I pumped the kid for information.

In the middle of the interview, the prosecutor pulled me aside and said, angrily, “Strobel, what’s wrong with you? This kid watched his brother and his friend get blown away, he’s probably going to die himself, and you’re interviewing him like you’re a comedian or something.”

His words haunted me for a long time. What *was* wrong with me? Why didn’t I care about that kid or his murdered friends? Why didn’t I empathize with the woman whose daughter had been murdered? Why did I only care about myself and my career? And worst of all, why didn’t all my success satisfy me? Why did I always want more?

MAN IN THE MIRROR

But it wasn’t my secret dissatisfaction that prompted me to look into the claims of Christianity. It was my wife.

Sometimes I hear Christians say that unbelievers can’t have a happy marriage because they don’t know what true love is. Well, we knew enough about it to be pretty fulfilled. We were best friends, living an exhilarating life, and for the most part didn’t have any worries. This is how I picture our life back

then: It was as if Leslie and I were driving through life in a convertible sports car, laughing and joking, totally carefree and happy.

So I was stunned when Leslie announced that she had become a Christian. I rolled my eyes and braced for the worst. I felt like the victim of some kind of scam. I had married one Leslie—the fun Leslie, the carefree Leslie, the risk-taking Leslie—and now I was afraid she was going to turn into some sort of sexually repressed prude who would trade our upwardly mobile lifestyle for all-night prayer meetings and volunteer work in grimy soup kitchens.

Instead I was pleasantly surprised—even fascinated—by the changes in her character, her integrity, and her personal confidence. At the same time, the more Leslie changed in positive ways, the more obvious it became that my own life and relationships were messed up. It was as if Leslie were holding up a mirror and I was seeing myself as I really was—and I didn't like the picture.

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

What finally brought me to faith in God was truth. I was a journalist. I had legal training from Yale Law School. I knew how to investigate a case and how to sift the evidence. And I knew how to face facts. If the evidence of history established convincingly that Jesus is who he claimed to be—the one-and-only Son of God—then I would have no choice but to follow him. My fruitless pursuit of happiness changed into a relentless pursuit of truth. That's what fueled my investigation into the evidence about Christ.

The rest of this book retraces that investigation. Of course, the questions I asked and the evidence I uncovered didn't always follow a logical, step-by-step progression. I'd look into one aspect of Christianity, then another and another, then

maybe return with new questions to the first issue. For 21 months I committed myself to exploring the case for and against Christ with an open mind. And that's all I ask of you: Start with an open mind, and see where the evidence leads you.