

“Powerful, poignant and pertinent. Malcolm touches both mind and spirit. As readable as it is credible. I wholeheartedly commend it.”

Revd John Glass, General Superintendent, Elim

“Powerfully and prophetically challenges the church to see this as an age of opportunity – to confidently contend for the faith and boldly offer the unbelievable gospel as the hope for the world.”

Revd Simon Ponsonby, Pastor of Theology, St Aldates Oxford

“*Unbelievable* has strengthened my belief and given me confidence, as well as an excitement and new vigour to share my faith with others.”

Fiona Castle OBE

“In exploring the Apostles’ Creed, *Unbelievable* roots us in the great truths of Scripture and in this we find a fresh confidence in the amazing God we serve and His purposes in the world.”

Steve Clifford, General Director, Evangelical Alliance

“Immensely accessible and helpful. I felt excitement burning in my heart as I imagined what the confident church could be, by the unfathomable Father, in the unbeatable Son and through the unstoppable Spirit. I’m a believer.”

Abby Guinness, Spring Harvest Event Director

“A call to regain a fully biblical faith, viewed through the lens of the Apostles’ Creed. A passionate call to authentic believing and living. An irresistible call to a confident yet humble faith in a gospel that still has the power to change the world!”

Stephen Gaukroger, Director, Clarion Trust International

“Deeply challenges and encourages. The Gospel is the hope for the world and Malcolm’s wonderfully written book gives every Christian greater confidence to share it.”

Gavin Calver, National Director, Youth for Christ

“God-honouring; Christ-centred; Holy Spirit-inspired; Bible-based; robust; intrusive; and demanding some kind of response. If what Malcolm writes here is true, life must become forever different.”

Jim Graham, Pastor Emeritus, Gold Hill Baptist Church

“A brilliant exposition. Biblical, readable, radical and practical – I loved it!”

Lyndon Bowring, Executive Chairman, CARE

“Simply, comprehensively, winsomely and compassionately, Malcolm Duncan leads us through an ancient Creed that educates our minds, illuminates our hearts, and presents us with a vision of an unfathomable, unbeatable, unstoppable God.”

Dr Steve Brady, Principal, Moorlands College, Christchurch

“The author has done a commendable job in bringing us back to solid theology at a time the church would be wise to be more and more interested in sound teaching.”

Dr R. T. Kendall

UNBELIEVABLE

CONFIDENT FAITH IN A SCEPTICAL WORLD

MALCOLM DUNCAN

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Text copyright © 2014 Malcolm Duncan
This edition copyright © 2014 Lion Hudson

The right of Malcolm Duncan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Monarch Books, an imprint of Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road, Oxford OX2 8DR, England
Email: monarch@lionhudson.com
www.lionhudson.com/monarch

and by Elevation (an imprint of the Memralife Group)
Memralife Group, 14 Horsted Square, Uckfield, East Sussex TN22 1QG
Tel: +44 (0)1825 746530; Fax +44 (0)1825 748899;
www.elevationmusic.com

ISBN 978 0 85721 534 5
e-ISBN 978 0 85721 535 2

First edition 2014

Acknowledgments

Unless otherwise stated Scripture quotations taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked “NIV” taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Anglicized. Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica, formerly International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. “NIV” is a registered trademark of Biblica UK trademark number 1448790. Scripture quotations marked “ESV” taken from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked “The Message” taken from THE MESSAGE, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. Scripture quotations marked “J. B. Phillips” taken from J. B. Phillips, “The New Testament in Modern English”, 1962 edition, published by HarperCollins. Scripture quotations marked “NLT” taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Extract pp. 108–109 *Just Like Jesus* © Max Lucado 2013, Thomas Nelson Inc. Nashville. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Extract p. 116 © 2009 Brennan Manning. *The Furious Longing of God* is published by David C Cook. All rights reserved.

Extract p. 142 *Under the Rainbow* © Catherine Campbell 2013. Published by Monarch Books.

Extract p. 155 *God’s Empowering Spirit* © Gordon Fee 2009. Used by permission of Baker Publishing.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in Malta, February 2014, LH28

*This book is dedicated to Isabel Beattie,
Ken and Peggy Wise, and Harry and
Sally Henderson. You have each taught
me the power of faith, the beauty of
perseverance, and a love of truth.*

*For the Gold Hill Family – may the
next chapter be the most exciting of
our lives.*

*In loving memory of Fred Beattie,
Frank Fadipe, John Clark, and all those
whom the Lord has called home this
year at Gold Hill. We miss them deeply.*



Contents

Foreword	9
Acknowledgments	12

Section One:

You become what you think

1. Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief: The power of honest faith in a sceptical world	17
2. Anchored, not drowning: The truth of the Gospel in a changing world	35
3. Confident, not arrogant: The impact of hope in a despairing world	59

Section Two:

Discovering the power of confidence in God

4. The Apostles' Creed: Unbelievable faith in a sceptical world	79
5. Unfathomable: I believe in God, the Father Almighty...	89
6. Unbeatable: I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...	112
7. Unstoppable: I believe in the Holy Spirit...	150

Conclusion

8. An unbelievable task:	
The call to change the world	181
About the author	192



Foreword

When I was a young Christian, newly converted to the faith, there were many books being written to help believers explain their faith to others. They tended to major on the reliability of the Christian faith in historic terms: Did Jesus really rise from the dead? How can we be sure that Jesus Christ existed? Is there any truth in the miracle stories in the Gospels? Good scholars produced very readable and well-argued books to help us have confidence in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There was also quite a lot of teaching and preaching to help Christians who weren't sure of their standing to have assurance that the Jesus they had put their faith in was to be trusted. Sometimes the image of Christ they portrayed was akin to that of an Edwardian English gentleman, whose word was His bond and who would go to any length to guarantee you salvation. He was eminently trustworthy and He'd said He wouldn't let go of you.

Now, I still believe that both those things are true: the story of Jesus – His life, death and resurrection, and the record of them in the Bible – is historical, true and believable; and God's word in Jesus Christ to His followers that He will never let go of us and that our life in Christ is eternally secure is to be trusted. But our current culture asks the questions differently – and wants different kinds of answers.

Unbelievable

Is anything about a supernatural faith credible at all? Or are Christians, as secular humanists claim, victims of a self-inflicted God delusion? Never mind the historical stuff or the trustworthiness of God's word, what are you Christians on about when you claim that the world is charged with the grandeur of God? Why should faith be given a platform in today's public arena when it's clearly only the whim and opinion of a minority who cling to dead dogma and superstition? And what gives you the right to share your beliefs and the ethics you derive from them at work when I find the conclusions you draw totally offensive? Those are the hard questions of today – and there are few Christians who haven't faced those hard questions and their implications. Sometimes it feels as if Matthew Arnold's famous words in his poem "Dover Beach" have come to be our present-day reality:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Malcolm Duncan is a pastor, teacher, friend and co-conspirator in the Spring Harvest Planning Group. *Unbelievable* goes right to the heart of those big questions

Foreword

that now dominate the lives of Christians who are seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ and witnesses to Him in today's world. This book is a conversation about this world and our place in it. It doesn't dodge the hard questions. It's brutally honest about the way it feels to have doubts. It takes us back to the story of God and what it means to inhabit that story. Malcolm reintroduces us to the Creed, not as an arid confession of faith, but as a living statement of our confidence in the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and lives in and through His Church in the power of the Spirit. God invites us to relationship – and in cultivating that relationship we rediscover confidence, reaffirm our belief, and reconnect to the mission of God.

Journey with Malcolm through the pages of this book – use it as a resource for discussion and study – and find again God's confidence in us and our confidence in Him. It's not so unbelievable after all.

Pete Broadbent

Bishop of Willesden and member of the Spring Harvest Planning Group



Acknowledgments

I cannot begin to express my gratitude to the Monarch team for their patience with me in this project. You have shown understanding beyond my wildest dreams. Thank you for absorbing the challenges I faced when my daughter was ill, which pushed the deadline for the manuscript back. As always, I consider myself blessed to be in partnership with you. I particularly want to thank Tony Collins, Jenny Ward, Simon Cox, and Andrew Hodder-Williams. I look forward to the years that lie ahead deeply humbled by your belief in me as a writer and as a communicator.

I also want to thank the Spring Harvest team. It's been a helter-skelter of a year and I am grateful to you all for your partnership. I am particularly grateful to Pete Broadbent for providing the foreword for this book. You all do a great job, and I pray God will continue to bless and encourage us as we journey forward. My prayer is that the best years are ahead.

The team at Gold Hill are fantastic and I am grateful to them. The whole church family is a joy, and I would not want to be anywhere else. Thank you for your love and prayers and for your support of my wider ministry. Without you, it wouldn't happen. Particular thanks to my eldership, Church Council, and staff team for the many times you have held me up in prayer. Particular thanks to Maria Bond, James Simmons, and Joyce Gledhill for your encouragement and support.

Thanks to my accountability group and to my friends

Acknowledgments

who pray for me and stand with me: John and Gill Newman, Duncan and Gill Stott, Brian and Isabel McCarthy, Terry and Jean O'Regan, and Christopher and Rachel Bird. Thank you.

My family deserve my deep thanks too. In a time of real illness and challenge, you have continued to support me and believe in me. You are *unbelievable!* Thank you to Debbie, Matthew, Benjamin, Anna, and Riodhna.

Lastly, my deepest and profoundest thanks and my worship belong to God. Without Him, there is just nothing to say.

Any truths you discover in these pages are the product of many minds and countless conversations. Any errors or omissions are, as always, my responsibility alone.

Section One

You become
what you think





Chapter One

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief: The power of honest faith in a sceptical world

“I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!”

The words of a desperate father to Jesus
Mark 9:24

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has
risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see
everything else.*

The words of C. S. Lewis, who described himself as the most
reluctant convert in all of England

Is theology poetry?

The small chapel of rest was still and quiet. My father’s remains lay before me, peaceful and lifeless. It was too early for the traffic on the Belfast street outside to be ramping up, so there was little noise to distract me.

My dad was dressed in his best grey suit, with his hair brushed and his hands folded across his chest. He was gone, and I was devastated. In a few hours, I would stand before the gathered mourners and conduct his funeral – the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life. I’d wear two hats. The more important to me was that I was a son, his son. For the purposes of the funeral and the mourners, I

was also the pastor, the “man of the cloth” conducting the service and guiding the congregation through the words of farewell and committal. I’d come to spend a few moments in quiet and to strengthen myself – and to say goodbye to him. I was confused, heartbroken, and bereft, but I knew I needed to do this. I loved him.

Why had God let this happen? No chance to say goodbye. No chance to hold his hand. No opportunity to thank him one last time for providing for me. No assurance that he had discovered God’s love for him and made peace with his Creator. No assurance that I would see him again. The one single prayer I had consistently prayed lay in ashes before me – colourless and lifeless. I had asked God every single day for sixteen years to bring my father to a personal place of repentance and faith in Jesus. I had dreamt about serving him Communion. I was convinced it would happen – yet here I was about to conduct his funeral and I had no idea whether God had answered that prayer or not. Nothing to hold on to. Nothing to assure me of my dad’s destiny. Just a dead body and a commitment to “do him proud”.

So I wept over his body. I held on to the side of his coffin and I sobbed. Alone, with no one watching but God, I let my heart break. My tears fell on his corpse. My hands shook. My head ached and the questions began to erupt from my heart like a round of artillery fire at God. *Why did You let him die? Why did You do this? Why didn’t You answer me? Why didn’t You do something to help? What are You going to do now? What do You want from me? Where are You? Don’t You care?*

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

The bullets just kept firing. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Then it subsided. I ran out of ammunition. I had no bullets left to fire, so I stopped. The sobbing continued but the purpose changed. Now I was sobbing and saying to God, *I can't take another step without You. I can't get through this day without You. I need You more than I have ever needed You and I feel You less than I ever have.*

The contradiction was stark. One minute I was shouting at God and wondering where He was, and the next I was telling Him I could not get through the day without Him. How does that make sense? I guess it doesn't, to many people. Either you believe or you don't. Either you trust God or you don't. But I don't really see it that way. I both trust God *and* struggle with Him. I believe in Him and I wonder where He is. The two things sometimes exist side by side in my head and heart.

As they placed the lid on my father's coffin, I stood like a sentry beside them. I still remember the sound of the turning clasps as they locked the lid to the coffin. Locking away my daddy. Locking away any last chance. It seemed like the sound of hope being locked away.

I turned and walked out in front of his remains. Outside were my darling mum, my three older brothers, and my older sister, Anne. None of them were Christians. Through the course of the day each of them helped me. My eldest brother literally held me up at the graveside when I struggled with the words, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope...". I didn't struggle with the first words, but with the last. Sure and certain hope?

Sure?

Certain?

Hope?

Hundreds of other mourners gathered, and the funeral went well. They said things like, *Good job! You did well! Your daddy would have been proud of you, so he would! I don't know how you did it, Malcolm! God bless you, son; thank you so much.* Of course I was grateful for the love and the support, but I don't think any of them knew how much I was struggling to keep it together and at the same time how utterly reliant I was on God to help me.

It was a struggle that would continue for months and months and months. Eventually I discovered a way through. I realized that I didn't have to understand God to trust Him. That helped me. It hasn't taken away my questions and it hasn't answered all my struggles; I have just realized that I can be honest about my questions. I don't have all the answers, and I don't care whether people think that makes me a good Christian or a bad one. I'd rather be honest than false. I am not going to pretend I understand God when I don't. I don't need to be perfect; I need to be authentic. It's only as I struggle that I grow.

I struggle with my faith.

That's OK.

There are times when the idea of "God" doesn't make any sense to me at all. I have questions that haven't been answered and some of the answers I *have* discovered are less than comforting to me. Some are about me, some are about the world, and some are about other people.

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

Why did God not stop the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 that devastated so many lives?

Why (at the time of writing) is Robert Mugabe still in power?

Why does faith sometimes not make sense?

Don't misunderstand me – I can give you a theological answer. I can talk about the impact of sin and the power of choice, and the ultimate promise that God will put all things right. I can explain that evil is prevalent in the world, that we all have a natural propensity to selfishness and greed. I can answer the question with the same rigour as many others. I believe all those answers with all my heart – but I still struggle with God sometimes.

As a pastor, I find myself asking God why I have had to bury so many people whose whole lives were snatched away from them when they had barely begun. I get confused about that. I feel helpless trying to support mums and dads and sons and daughters who are mourning. I don't have the answers so I just weep with them, walk with them, love them. I'll gently point them to Scripture, help them say whatever they need to say to God, and suggest some of the biblical, spiritual, and pastoral things that will help them through this time, but I still do not always get God.

As a preacher, I ask myself how I can make a text that spans thousands of years and many different genres and addresses hundreds of different cultures make any sense whatsoever to the people I engage with today. There are bits that seem to fit well and others that don't seem to make sense or help at all. I don't always get God.

As a son, I wonder why my father died so suddenly in 2002 and why I never got the chance to say goodbye. As a father, I wonder why my son has had to struggle with illness for so many years. As a husband, I've watched my wife bravely battle illness and setback after setback and wanted to shout at God, "Enough already!" As a man, I've battled my own demons, faced my own illnesses, and struggled with my own doubts, weaknesses, and failures. I don't always get God.

Is it just me?

I don't think I am on my own in my struggles with my faith. I think millions of Christians struggle with God. I'd go as far as to suggest that if your faith is ever going to be real and lasting and genuine then you are going to have struggles. You'll face your own crises and fears. You'll have your own dark moments. I think we often want God to be God in ways that are not the ways of God at all. We want Him to make us feel indestructible instead of learning to trust that He is invincible. We want Him to remove pain from our lives instead of allowing Him to teach us, in the words of the old Welsh hymn, that *faith can sing through days of sorrow; all will be well*. I think we struggle with the God who is there because we want Him to be a different kind of God. We want Him to be a panacea and we'd rather reinterpret Him than reorientate ourselves. We'd prefer a nicer God, a safer God. We'd like to make Him more like us, because then people might like Him more. We think that because pain is present,

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

God must not be. The reality is, however, that God is not absent from the pain of the world; He is present in it. Listen to the words of Deena Metzger:

God is the most fragile, a bare smear of pollen, that scatter of yellow dust from the tree that tumbled over in the storm of my grief and planted itself again. God is the death agony in the frog that cannot find water in the time of the drought we created. God is the scream of the rabbit caught in the fires we set. God is the One whose eyes never close and who hears everything.

Deena Metzger, *Ruin and Beauty*

We forget that it is in the midst of our flesh-and-blood life that we meet God. He never comes in a vacuum. He always speaks *into* history from eternity and therefore we meet Him in the *reality* of life. It is in the midst of the messiness, the sadness, the pain, the joy, and the celebration and in *actual living* that we meet Him. We can *do* all things through Christ who strengthens us, Paul said to the Philippians. Paul did not suggest we could avoid the hard bits of life or its questions and uncertainties; he said we could face them.

Christian faith is not a highly developed avoidance technique

We Christians can end up thinking that “belief” and “doubt” are at opposite ends of the spectrum. It’s easy to think that because we have questions, we cannot be “good”

Christians. That's a false dichotomy. The story of the man who wanted his son to be healed by Jesus, recorded in Mark 9, helps us to understand that:

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

Mark 9:14-29

The words of this desperate father hint at where the real dichotomy lies in Christian living when it comes to faith. In verse 23, the father cries out to Jesus, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us." Jesus' reply to the man is that all things can be done for the person who believes. At this stage, the man cries out to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." He doesn't put "faith" and "doubt" as the opposites that are creating tension in his life. He puts "belief" and "unbelief" at opposite ends of the spectrum. It is as if he is saying, "I am believing as much as I can – I come as honestly and openly as I can; I am giving You *both* my belief in You and my unbelief in You, so do something with the belief I have and deal with the unbelief that I have." That is a very different thing from saying that his doubts

somehow stop God from moving or lessen God's power. Perhaps if we come before God with honesty, vulnerability, and transparency, we offer Him a space in which to move and work. Perhaps He can do more with our authenticity than He can with our perceived "strength" of faith.

Like the father in this story and like me, many of us struggle with belief and doubt. We live in an age of deep skepticism and questioning in which we want reasons and explanations for everything. For many decades now, from perhaps as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century and the birth of the Enlightenment, reason and logic and rationality have been trying to push concepts such as "faith", "trust", and "truth" into the shadows. We have fallen into an intellectual elitism that suggests that if we cannot understand something, then we should not trust it. This increasing desire for "certainty" and "verifiable" answers is not at all wrong, but it can lead to a wrong place. It can lead to an over-defensiveness on the part of Christians and an over-dismissiveness on the part of non-Christians.

I wonder where we get the idea that Christians have to be certain about everything. Isn't it acceptable to say, "I am not sure"? Does God demand of us that we have absolute certainty about everything? I think not. I think we are allowed to ask questions. We are allowed to be honest. We are allowed to be authentic. Over the years of my Christian faith, I have discovered that I have less faith than I thought. I once thought my faith was like a mountain and the challenges it faced were like mustard seeds. I now think I have faith like a mustard seed and that the challenges I face

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

are like mountains. At the same time, I have been heartened by the reality that Jesus told His followers that if they had faith as small as a mustard seed they could tell a mountain to move (Matthew 17:20).

I think I now have less certainty but more faith. I no longer feel the need to answer all the questions people put to me; instead, I know that there are a few deeply important questions that I must be able to answer and that my faith shapes my convictions about these things – and this somehow enables me to let go of the constant need to have answers. Let me give you a few examples.

If I am asked how God made the world, I can give you some suggestions, but I don't really know. Yet I am utterly convinced that He did.

If I am asked why God allows suffering, I'll point out some general principles that I think help, but I can't really answer the question very satisfactorily. Yet I am utterly convinced that God understands our suffering as a participant and not as a bystander.

If I am asked why evil exists in the world, I have some basic responses that might further the discussion but I can't really give you a full defence. Yet I can tell you that I believe that God is good and His love endures for ever.

If I am asked how the cross of Jesus works, I can give you broad answers that are rooted in the Bible and the traditions of the Church, but to be honest it is still a deep mystery to me. Yet I know it works because I have experienced its transforming power in my life.

To bring it full circle, if you ask me why God let my

dad die I can't give you an answer, but I can now say that I trust God and one day He will answer that question when I ask Him. Ironically, on the day He does so, I don't think the answer will matter very much at all. In the meantime, I am learning to trust God, and I don't need to have all the answers and be able to explain everything in order to trust Him. I may not know much about Him, but I know He is a loving Creator, who made the world and has a plan and a purpose for it and for me.

Theology is much more like poetry than it is mathematical formulae, journalistic prose, or legal defence. While our statements about God should be accurate, descriptive, and clear, they should also allow room for mystery, wonder, and worship. There is much we know about God, but this pales into insignificance compared to that which we do not know. We must allow ourselves to enter the mystery without the need to completely understand him. We cannot entirely contain the uncontainable. We cannot completely explain the inexplicable. To have faith means to trust, and we can trust God without having to completely understand Him. This is true in any relationship – we do not have to completely understand someone to trust them.

The power of honest faith in a sceptical world

Trust and faith are out of fashion. Think about all the great institutions and symbols of trust, confidence, and authority in our nation, and how we respond to them, and we will see the level to which our “trust” and “faith” have

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

been eroded. Trust and confidence aren't at a particularly high level either when it comes to what we believe or how we live out our faith.

External challenges

Broadcasting agencies and the media have had their reliability questioned because of scandals concerning abusive partners, phone tapping, self-serving board members, and journalistic deceit. Police authorities have been undermined by the way they have handled football tragedies, cover-ups, and the deliberate smearing of people in the public eye. Politicians are perceived as selfish, untruthful, and morally suspect because of their handling of expenses and their constant inability to give a direct answer to a direct question. Bankers and financial institutions have suffered a deep loss of credibility because of fixed lending rates, over-borrowing, and self-preservation. Food supplies are suspect because of the use of dubious sources and supply chains. Schools and universities have been guilty of changing league tables. Hospitals and social care facilities have treated patients badly and neglected those who are the most vulnerable. It's not a particularly "trust-inspiring" picture, is it?

Challenges to the Church

"The Church" is tarnished by revelation after revelation of abusive priests, covered-up investigations or failure to provide a moral lead for society on a wide range of topics.

Internally, we have major discussions on a number of issues from sexual ethics to the importance and role of men and women in the Church, not to mention heated discussions on how we make decisions and what the priorities of the Church should be in the twenty-first century. If we are not careful, we argue over the secondary matters while the world around us struggles to discover its meaning and purpose. We eagerly debate sexual ethics but ignore the challenge of the boardroom. Many local Churches seem to be poorly led, with preaching that doesn't relate particularly well to our daily lives or modern society. Petty church politics can eat away at our credibility. Services, structures, and budgets in local congregations can all too often reflect the needs, desires, and preferences of those who are already part of the church family, and ignore the needs of those outside. That isn't a particularly "trust-inspiring" picture either, is it?

We need a way of being confident in a sceptical world

Our society is asking big questions, and we often look as if we are fumbling about in the dark for answers. Questions such as:

- How can Christ be the only way in a world of religious diversity?
- Why do Christians seem to think they have a right to a place in public life?
- Does Christian education strengthen or weaken those it seeks to teach?
- What is marriage?

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

- How can the Church refuse to bless gay relationships?
- How can you expect us to take the Church seriously if you ignore women in your structures and leadership models?
- Why should we take the Church or Christianity seriously at all?

Many of these questions are being asked not only by those outside the Church but also by those within the Christian community. There are, of course, many answers to the questions that we face. The Church in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, has some brilliant leaders, preachers, teachers, and apologists. We have men and women who are positively and enthusiastically engaging in the issues of our day and seeking to shape public opinion and lead discussion rather than always being on the back foot. There are robust, sensible, engaging answers to ALL the questions I have set out above if we only take the time to listen to the arguments.

Yet it strikes me that there is *still* a lack of confidence in the Church in the United Kingdom and North America. We don't just see it in the big questions that we listen to on the radio or watch on the television or engage with through other media. We see a lack of confidence in the way we explain our faith to our friends and family. We see it in our fear of sharing the story of our own relationship with God. We often see it in a basic inability to explain what *being a Christian* actually means. We are losing the ability to articulate our faith, to share our story, to engage in dialogue, and to point people to Jesus.

The need for confidence

As a matter of urgency, we need to discover how to strengthen our confidence in the purposes and plans of God. If we do not find a way of doing that, we run the risk of creating an increasingly weaker Church, in all the wrong senses of the word. Not weak as in servant-hearted, or weak as in poor. I do not mean weak as in free from political power and on the margins of society, or weak as in claiming no God-given right to tell people what to do. For many of us, including me, this kind of weakness would be most welcome! No, I mean weak as in disconnected from our purpose and our roots or weak as in lacking any authentic encounter with God Himself. I mean weak as in failing to develop robust, strong, and holistic disciples who understand everything they are and everything they do to be a reflection of what they believe about God, His purposes, and our place in His world. If we do not do something to discover confidence again, we will pass on the baton of a shallower Gospel, we will stand in the shadow of a smaller cross, and we will raise up leaders with a diminished and curtailed vision for the world than God would have them pursue. The weakness I fear most is not a weakness created by what other people say or do to us. Instead, the weakness I fear most is that of a Church that has lost its moorings, drifts into the fog of relativism, and scuppers itself on the dangerous rocks of popularity and acceptance.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was once the pastor of Westminster Chapel in central London, argued that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she

Lord, I believe; forgive my unbelief

invariably attracts it. He suggested that it is when we are distinct as Christians that the society around us wants to listen to us, even if society hates us for a while first. Francis Schaeffer levelled this great charge against the Evangelical Church, naming it the “great evangelical disaster”:

Here is the great evangelical disaster. It is the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this, namely, accommodation. The evangelical church has accommodated itself to the world spirit of the age.

Francis Schaeffer

Answers that connect to people

My experience tells me that we need answers that connect, both for ourselves and as we reach out to others. They need to make sense. Most people don't want big, sweeping academic solutions to their questions, although we *must* maintain *intellectual* rigour as we address the big issues that we face. But first of all our answers must be grounded. They must be real. They must actually help people to understand what it means to be a Christian and what it does not mean. Just like the man who wanted Jesus to heal his son, most Christians today say to Jesus, “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief.” We want ways of connecting with God that are reliable. We want a better understanding of God and a better experience of Him. We want answers that connect with our work, our homes, and our families.

We want a framework that will stand the test of time. We want a strong foundation. We want a way of understanding

God, the world, and our place in it that will continually enable us to be faithful to Christ and effective for Christ. We need the energy to keep going and we want a clear sense of purpose and direction. We want confidence in God and we need to know that God has confidence in us.

Such a framework of faith is not only possible, it already exists.

- The foundation is the truth of God as revealed to us through the Bible.
- Our way of understanding God, the world, and our place in it is found in the great credal statements of the Church.
- The energy we need is found first in conversion and then in being continually strengthened and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- The clear sense of purpose that we need is found in God's purposes for His Son as lived out through the Church, His bride on earth.

Our confidence is in God who has revealed Himself to us through His Son, Jesus, and has made plain His plans and purposes in the unchanging Gospel of Christ, and it is to this that we now turn. C. S. Lewis, writing in 1945, said:

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

We need a similarly God-centred vision of ourselves, our world, and God's beautiful purposes for it. It is to such a vision that we now turn.