



towards▶belief

Life Group Material

*Bracken Ridge*  
BAPTIST CHURCH



# towards ► belief

Towards Belief follows Australian host, Karl Faase as he travels to the UK, USA and Australia to interview more than thirty leading authors, speakers and apologists as they seek to defuse the top belief blockers to Christian faith of our time. The series consists of 10 episodes and looks at topics such as suffering, religious violence, exclusive faith, church abuse, science plus others.

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# ► 1. suffering

“Does the scale and depth of human suffering call into question the existence of an all-powerful, good God?”

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of how to reconcile human pain and suffering with the idea of a good God is a universal question. Many people have identified suffering as the reason why they can't believe in God.

How can Christians believe in an all-powerful God who allows suffering? Does the fact of suffering mean that God is not a God of love? Or does it mean God is impotent—unable to stop the suffering? Or does suffering prove there is no God?

***Watch episode: suffering***

## UNPACKING THE ISSUE

Philosopher, Richard Swinburne admits that the question of why a good God would allow suffering “is and always has been really the most important and influential argument against the existence of God in history”. There is some diversity in the intellectual Christian response to ‘the problem of pain’. Below we will look at various arguments put forward by Christian thinkers to deal with the idea of suffering. However it's important to realise that philosophical explanations, while important, don't always help an individual in the midst of real suffering.

### ***No God?***

Atheist philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris writes in his book *An Atheist Manifesto*, “If God exists, either He can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities, or He does not care to”. That makes God “either impotent or evil”. Therefore the most “reasonable and less odious conclusion” for Harris is that there is no God at all. However, it has been well-established by philosophers that such arguments are weak: at a

purely logical level, just because we can't imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn't mean there can't be one. Unless we have some sort of divine, eternal perspective upon all of time we can't draw conclusions that could 'disprove' God's existence from our own finite experience and knowledge.

“... there's an assumption at the outset that if God has good reasons for allowing the suffering that he does, we should know what those reasons are. But why think that? I mean if parents for instance were choosing to move city ... to the young child that might be the very worst thing that could possibly happen. It might be completely unfathomable why the parents would choose to do that and yet from our adult perspective we might be able to look in and say actually they had good reasons to move city.”  
*Vince Vitale*

### ***Free will and a good God***

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga argues that God cannot determine that free creatures will only do what is right, or they would not be significantly free. Therefore people capable of moral good must be capable of moral evil. Plantinga says, “The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.”

“The first reason why there is suffering is because God has given free will to people and that's a blessing, but the suffering is an unfortunate consequence of the blessing.” *Richard Swinburne*

### ***A broken world and a suffering God***

Again and again, the Bible speaks of a fallen existence, of a world that contains much that is evil and broken. The philosopher David Bentley Hart writes that much of the brokenness we see around us is a result of what the New Testament book of Romans, Chapter 8, refers to as creation “groaning”: that the world as we see it is somehow estranged from God and that evil and suffering are not ordained by God but are enemies of God's true intentions for the world. The Bible also points to how God deals with suffering and evil. On the cross, Jesus takes on the darkness and, in an ultimate sense, defeats it. The resurrection of Jesus tells a compelling story of God condemning all the things that have destroyed life, and promising a day when the weight of history and all the centuries

of human cruelty, sadness and loss will be overcome. It also tells the story of a God who suffers with us; one who understands and empathises with our burdens and brokenness.

“God entered into this world in the person of Jesus, suffered betrayal from friends and physical torture, injustice and eventually crucifixion. That for me is not so much the answer to the question of suffering but it tells me what God is like. God entered the world and did that for me. He knows my pain, not just because He’s all knowing but because He’s experienced it first hand. And I can cry out to this God with all of my doubts, all my anger and know that He is that kind of God – not distant in the corner of the universe watching us or mocking us but here with us, suffering with us. And that makes the difference. I can trust Him with all the other stuff because I know what His heart is like. His heart is like someone who would give Himself for me.”

*John Dickson*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *John Dickson says, “You can’t use suffering to disprove God’s existence”. Do you agree or disagree? Why?*

2. *Frank Brennan says that, “We’ve only got a finite time here on this earth and we need to make sure that we don’t add to the suffering of the world by our own actions. There’s a personal aspect [to this] - we have some responsibility to each other and to ourselves. Life is tough enough without additions coming through that are within our hands”. How do you account for suffering that is created by human cruelty?*

*3. A friend says to you that the Holocaust showed that there can't be a God. How do you respond?*

*4. How do you respond to Alvin Plantinga's argument that moral evil is a consequence of moral freedom, that you can't have free will without the ability to choose wrong over right?*

*5. If there is no God, then suffering has no ultimate meaning. We simply live in an indifferent universe. Do you agree that if you are an atheist you have to face the reality of a 'blind, pitiless' universe?*

*6. Christianity doesn't provide exhaustive answers as to why we suffer but it does promise that God is with us in our suffering and that there is hope for the future despite our pain. Do you find the Christian response to suffering to be comforting? Why or why not?*

## ► 2. the bible

“Is it reasonable for a person in the 21st Century to base their life on the Bible?”

### INTRODUCTION

Critics of Christianity say that the decision to base one's life on the teachings of the Bible, an ancient, archaic text, is foolhardy. The Bible's historical reliability is questioned, as is any mention of the supernatural in the text. Also, some of the Bible's teachings, particularly those from the Old Testament, appear irrelevant to modern life.

The following episode explores some of these questions: Should we take the Bible literally? Is it a trustworthy and reliable document, or a work of fiction? How do we apply its teaching to today's world? Is it simply foolish to stake our lives on this book?

***Watch episode: the bible***

### UNPACKING THE ISSUE

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins echoes the doubts of many when he writes: “Much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and ‘improved’ by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries”.

There are lots of issues around the reliability and relevance of the Bible that all need to be unpacked in order to see if Dawkins' comment is fair.

***The reliability of the Bible***

“When you compare biographies of recent figures in the ancient world ... they had a whole lot of historical information that would be reliable. They would check with eyewitnesses and so on. When



you look at the Gospels and you compare the Gospels, you see again a lot of overlap of information. And they're not just making things up." *Craig Keener*

Firstly, it's important to look at how the Bible is put together. Is it really just a "cobbled-together" anthology or is it historically reliable? Are there errors in transmission that mean the document we have today is different from the original text?

Christians point to a range of factors that give them confidence in the biblical material. Firstly, there are over 24,000 ancient New Testament manuscripts. This is an enormous number that dwarfs other ancient subjects in terms of the raw materials with which to study. These documents were written very close to the time period they write about, for example, Paul's letters date to within 20 years of Jesus' life. There is also a wealth of ancient non-Christian references to Jesus, as well as archaeological evidence that supports the texts.

Even non-Christian scholars who study the Gospels believe them to be a reliable account of Jesus' life and the New Testament to be a trustworthy source of what the early Christians came to understand to be the meaning of that life.

"Very quickly as the New Testament was known it was copied and reproduced and that's a tremendous protection against fraud and forgery because you don't just have two or three manuscripts which could easily have been tampered with. You've got thousands." *Amy Orr-Ewing*

### ***Making sense of miracles***

What are we to make of the miracles and supernatural events within the Bible? Does the fact that the Bible contains miracles mean that it was simply made up? Amy Orr-Ewing notes that within the Bible there is an acknowledgement that when unusual and miraculous things happen "people are terrified, they're amazed, they don't believe it at first". They seek evidence and reason to believe those miracles, even those who first experienced them. "We have genuine human reactions to miraculous interventions", she says. We will consider the idea of miracles and the supernatural in greater detail in our next episode: supernatural.

“To me it comes down to the question of how open-minded are you? Have you closed your mind to the possibility of a god existing, of miraculous interventions? If you have closed your mind to even that possibility, you have a prior commitment to the idea that there are no miracles. Then you’re going to bring that assumption onto the Bible and you’re not going to even consider those claims. So my question to a sceptical friend is, “On what basis have you closed your mind? What evidence is there for that materialist worldview? Are you willing to at least be open?” *Amy Orr-Ewing*

### ***The relevance of the Bible today***

Finally, even if it is historically accurate, we are still left with the question of whether the Bible has relevance for our lives today. Dr Greg Clarke makes an important point that even though the Bible might look outdated because it’s from an older time, “it’s human beings wrestling with the same issues, just back then in a different place with different resources to do the wrestling”. For believers, the Bible is a life-changing book, a book of books that changes people’s lives. Theologian N.T. Wright says that in our “pick-and-mix culture” of fractured identities, the Bible offers a coherent narrative that tells us what it is to be human, what it is to be loved, and what it is ‘to know’; because the love of God is “the highest and fullest sort of knowing that there is”.

“Trust in the Bible changes your life, transforms your life. If you start to believe the teachings of the Bible - things like that God loves you, that Jesus Christ came into the world to die for your sins so you could have peace with God, that the world’s got a structure and a plan and it’s going somewhere - these are things that lighten your heart. They change your direction in life. They give you focus; they give you hope.” *Greg Clarke*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *What are some reasons why people might believe that the Bible is irrelevant to modern life? And what are some reasons why people might believe the opposite - that the Bible is relevant to life today?*

*2. The Bible contains stories of the miraculous. Is this problematic for you? Why/Why not?*

*3. The majority of New Testament scholars would claim that the evidence for Jesus is beyond doubt. Why then do you think the life of Jesus is often dismissed as a fairy tale?*

*4. Greg Clarke says that the Bible "is like other books in that you can read it in the normal way you'd read a book. But it's special because of the message it carries. It claims to put you in contact with God ... " What is your response to the idea that the Bible contains revelation from God?*

*5. Greg Clarke makes the point that the Bible contains books of strikingly different genres and they should be read as such. Why is this important in terms of interpreting the Bible?*

*6. Do you agree that a certain degree of open mindedness is required when approaching the Bible?*

## 3. supernatural

“Can the miracles and supernatural events of the Bible be taken seriously in the modern world dominated by science and technology?”

### **INTRODUCTION**

Christians believe in the supernatural. The Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, contain extraordinary accounts of miraculous interventions by God, including the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In a secular, ‘scientific’ age, some people cite the supernatural elements of the biblical narrative as a reason not to take Christianity seriously.

Is it reasonable to believe in the supernatural? Or is it a fairy tale for weak-minded people?

***Watch episode: supernatural***

### **UNPACKING THE ISSUE**

There are a whole range of issues to explore around belief in the supernatural. There are philosophical questions about the possibility of miracles: are miracle stories simply the product of a ‘primitive’ society? There are also theological concerns: why are miracles so important to the Christian narrative? And what do we make of stories of the miraculous in a culture that places its faith in the hard facts of science?

***Hume’s arguments about the miraculous***

Western society’s take on the supernatural has been profoundly influenced by the work of philosopher David Hume. He saw a miracle as an event that “violates the laws of nature”. He held that it is a logical contradiction for anything to break an immutable law. However, miracles might be thought of, not as acts that are impossible in our world, but acts that only someone beyond our reality - like God - could do.

As for Hume, his argument is a circular argument in that it begins with an assumption that miracles can’t happen and then argues against them from there.

“Hume says there’s no credible eyewitnesses for miracles. But even in his own day there were people who claimed to have experienced miracles and he simply dismissed their credibility because of course we know that miracles don’t happen. So [the problem is] it’s a circular argument.” *Craig Keener*

### ***The possibility of the supernatural***

The whole question boils down to a fairly simple but profound clash of worldviews. If you are open to the idea of the universe being the deliberate work of a personal God who created all things out of nothing, who preserves and governs the universe, then it won’t be much of a stretch to think that sometimes He might choose to intervene by producing amazing works of power that are ‘signposts’ to Him. But if you are not open to the possibility of that kind of being, then you’ll have a hard time accepting miracles and a spiritual dimension to life.

“By the supernatural you mean God intervening in the natural order ... the natural order itself is sustained by God and kept in operation by God and I think there are good arguments for that. [But] God is not just at work when things behave oddly, God is at work when things behave regularly.” *Richard Swinburne*

### ***The Bible and miracles***

Some liberal Christian thinkers try to expunge the supernatural from the biblical narrative to make Christianity more palatable with a naturalistic worldview, but miracles are a central element of the Christian faith. In particular, Jesus’ miracles are vital pointers to His claim of being God among us.

### ***Miracles in today’s world***

Craig Keener points out that our western culture has been shaped by the “prejudices of Hume”, but that many in the developing world have no problem believing in miracles.

“It’s been documented in studies that there are hundreds of millions of people who claim to have experienced miracles; claim to have experienced divine healing. Now many of those would have alternative possible explanations, but there are some of the more convincing ones. You accumulate them and you say, if I have an open mind it makes more sense to accept the supernatural explanation than another kind of explanation.” *Craig Keener*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

*1. Read John's Gospel, Chapter 20. The resurrection of Jesus is central to the faith. The theologian and writer N.T. Wright has demonstrated that a physical resurrection of an individual was completely outside contemporary Jewish experience. Why do you think there are such reactions of incredulity to the resurrection, both from Jesus' own disciples and from our own culture?*

*2. Have you (or anyone you know) had an experience of the supernatural? How do you explain this experience?*

*3. In the vox pops for this episode one person claims, "People's psychology gets in the way of their reason and they like to associate miracles with the supernatural just because they can't rationalise them. There are events we can't explain and therefore that becomes a miracle. Is it the supernatural? I'm not so sure". Do you agree with this statement? Why/ Why not?*

*4. Christopher Hitchens wrote that, "Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important". Do you think there is any need for the supernatural in this world or do you think science offers all the answers we need?*

*5. Describe your reaction to Craig Keener's story of his sister-in-law and Dr Sean George's account of his heart attack?*

*6. Not all the people who witnessed the miracles of Jesus were convinced to become His followers. Would you expect the same reaction if He was physically present on earth to perform miracles today?*

*7. Plenty of Christians talk about the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, sometimes through miraculous events. What questions would you have for someone in that situation?*

## ► 4. religious violence

“Does religion, and the Christian faith in particular, cause or condone violence?”

### INTRODUCTION

Christopher Hitchens' book *God Is Not Great* is subtitled, “How religion poisons everything”. The New Atheists (as Hitchens and other writers have been labelled) are vocal in their claim that religion is not good for the world but is instead “the root of all evil”. In Christianity's case, terrible events from Christian history are used to show that great evils have been done in Christ's name. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, also comes under attack, as an ancient out-of-date text that encourages atrocities and condones violent practices.

Is this a reasonable position to hold? Does religion cause violence? Would the world be less violent without religion? Does the Bible condone violence? We attempt to unpack these questions in this episode.

***Watch episode: religious violence***

### UNPACKING THE ISSUE

There is no question that the followers of Christ have at times behaved in distinctly un-Christlike ways. But this issue is far more complex than some would have us believe. For example, the extreme stance taken by the New Atheists in claiming that almost all wars stem from religion is demonstrably false. The Bible's take on violence is also far from straightforward. Christ's own teaching stood in stark opposition to the use of violence and force - Jesus preached love for enemies and His life ended in his sacrificial death on the cross.

### ***Acknowledging the evil***

Religion has been implicated in all sorts of conflict and violence throughout human history. The Crusades, the Inquisition and 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland all had religious influences. The witch-hunts of the early modern period across Europe and in North America are also a dark chapter in Christian history and bring up questions of violence, especially against women.



## ***Religion used to justify and motivate violence***

“As we look back on the history of the Christian Church, we have to be honest that there were the Crusades, there were inquisitions but as a Christian when I look at those historical events ... I ask myself, ‘Are those a genuine, natural outworking of the ideology or are they a subversion of the idea?’” *Amy Orr-Ewing*

Many of the violent events throughout history, which have been attributed to religion and to Christianity, were in fact political struggles in which religion was used as a battering ram to build support for the struggle. There are many examples where this has clearly been the case and yet the violence itself has been blamed on religion.

The Church needs to repent and reflect on why Christianity has at times been associated with violence, and confront moments in its past where the Church has disobeyed Christ's call to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”, (Luke 6:27). At certain times in history faith has been, in Miroslav Volf's phrase, ‘instrumentalised to achieve extraneous goals’.

### ***The Bible and violence***

Critics of Christianity, particularly those arguing that religion is inherently violent, will point to what they see as violent and objectionable behaviour in the Bible. God's command to Israel to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:1-2) is often used as an example of Biblically sanctioned violence. Yet certain factors need to be considered. Old Testament scholars point out that passages like this are examples of conquest narrative, where real events involving violence are described but exaggeration has also been employed as a literary form. The existence of Canaanites in later passages and discussions about how they and the Israelites are to live together also work against the theory of a wholesale genocide. Further, these events are certainly specific to the time and place and are not-to-be-repeated moments in Israel's history.

More importantly, most violent incidents that occur in books of the Bible are purely historical narrative. They should be viewed as descriptive, not prescriptive: as telling the story, not condoning violence in any way.

“The first thing to work out is what stories are endorsing violence in the Old Testament and which don't. Richard Dawkins picks a whole lot of stories that look terrible, but most of the stories he picks are in the Bible to show how bad Israel [God's people] were.” *John Dickson*

## ***Real Christianity: What Christ taught***

Those who perpetrate or perpetuate violence are actually distorting, not upholding, the message of Christianity. A genuine interpretation of Christianity's core elements would not sanction human violence but would instead resist it. Jesus taught non-violence, and at His death on the cross, Jesus chose to take violence on Himself, ultimately removing the power of violence and death.

*“If the name of Christ is used to justify religious violence then people are not following, but disobeying Christ.” John Lennox*

The key reality of the Christian message is the call to 'love your neighbour'. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught non-violence and love of enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). Furthermore, Jesus Himself was non-violent at the prospect of His own death. He expected those who followed Him to behave in the same manner.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- 1. How convincing do you find the arguments in this episode explaining why there is violence in the Old Testament?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. Is it reasonable to say that the 'Old Testament God' is a God of violence? Why/Why not?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3. How is it possible that Christianity has been implicated in violence over the centuries, given the clear teaching of Jesus?*

4. *How much does it count against the faith that those claiming to follow Christ have exhibited violent behaviour?*

5. *A friend says to you, "Religion has caused most of the wars of history". How do you respond?*

6. *In what way has Christianity been a force against violence? Can you think of examples of this?*

7. *When Amy Orr Ewing looks at examples from history of so-called religious violence, she looks for examples of "genuine Christians who were actual followers of Jesus at the times of these events who stood up at the time and said, 'No, this isn't right'". She cites the example of St Francis of Assisi, who spoke against the Crusades and preached the Gospel to both the crusaders and the Muslim armies. John Lennox argues the same about Northern Ireland. How compelling do you find these arguments? Do you agree that violent events in Christian history are evidence not of the inherent violence of Christianity, but of Christians being 'not Christian enough'?*

## ► 5. exclusive faith

“Is the Christian claim to exclusive truth judgemental and unreasonable?”

### INTRODUCTION

Christians claim that only a trust in Jesus can put a person in a right relationship with God. In an increasingly pluralistic world the idea of an absolute truth is out of vogue, and therefore the exclusivity of Christianity's claim is confronting. This claim appears intolerant or even bigoted because it necessarily assumes that all other religions and worldviews are wrong.

Are the exclusive claims of Christianity reasonable, ridiculous or even dangerous? And what does this mean for other worldviews?

***Watch episode: exclusive faith***

### UNPACKING THE ISSUE

A commonly held view in our society is that all different religions have access to some part of the same overall truth, but none have the full picture. This belief is summed up in the phrase, “That is your truth, not mine”. Such religious relativism is known as ‘pluralism’, i.e. that there is no particular right or wrong when it comes to religion, but rather all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual. The problem is, Christianity's claim to complete and final revelation contradicts this view. What are we to make of this?

***It is not only Christianity that makes exclusive claims***

“[People] don't believe in truth - everything is relatively true but of course you can't fly an airplane at 30,000 feet on that sort of post-modern nonsense. Truth matters.” *Os Guinness*

Everyone makes exclusive claims, not just Christianity. The argument that Christianity is wrong to make exclusive claims is in itself an exclusive

claim! Pastor Tim Keller calls relativism “a dogmatic religious assertion that all religions are basically the same”.

“Every single major world religion, even atheism (which is) the lack of religion, is exclusive. If you are an atheist, then you’re excluding those that have faith. If you are a universalist and say all roads lead the same way then you are excluding those who believe they have a way to God, whether it’s a Muslim person, Jewish person or a Christian person.” *Michelle Tepper*

### ***What about other religions?***

“The issue is if something truly is true then other things must be false. Contradictions cannot be true and all world religions have contradictions in them. They don’t say the same thing.” *Michelle Tepper*

Different religions make different claims about the truth. For example, Islam, Judaism and Christianity hold to very different teachings about Jesus and different religions also have different ideas on morality, history, and the character of God.

“We should look carefully and thoughtfully at what the religions teach because it’s just wrong to suggest they all teach the same thing. They just don’t. I mean, it’s disrespectful to all religions to say that they’re all kind of pathways to the one reality. They teach very, very different things.” *Greg Clarke*

### ***What does it mean to be tolerant?***

Tolerance is not a lazy, intellectually sloppy acceptance of everyone. Rather, it is about respecting, engaging, and treating with compassion those with whom you disagree. It is not intolerant per se to believe in one truth. Michael Ramsden, from the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, believes that our society struggles with the idea of truth because there is “an implied judgmentalism [in] saying other people are wrong”. However, he argues that if someone is a follower of Christ, the truth of what they believe should mean that they don’t come across as harsh or judgemental. He says, “If you want to know the truth of what I’m saying to you, you should be able to taste my life and what you should get ... [is] truth and grace”.

“We say that Jesus is the only truth, the ultimate truth but we [also] believe all human beings are made in the image of God, so we all bear the mark and spark of the Divine, the one true God. And so there are true, good, wonderful things in humanity. So there are good, true, wonderful things in other philosophies, in other world religions. You know, Buddhism, there’s a wonderful thing of peace in it. There are many different religions that [have] great things of morality and ethics we can learn from.”  
*Michelle Tepper*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

*1. Several people in the vox pop section of this episode claim that there are multiple ways to God. What do you make of pluralism? Why do you think pluralism is so popular in the West?*

*2. In the Bible Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. (John 14:6). What do you understand this to mean?*

*3. Do you think people can disagree on what the truth is and still live well together? Have you seen any examples of this among your family and friends?*

*4. Do you agree with Michael Ramsden's argument that even someone from the Baha'i faith - which is known for accepting many different beliefs - necessarily conflicts with the Christian (or any other) claim to exclusive 'truth'?*

*5. John Dickson says a definition of true tolerance is "treating with love and humility someone whose opinions you believe to be untrue and invalid"? Is this a helpful way of understanding tolerance?*

*6. What is appealing about relativism - the idea that your truth is equal to my truth? What are the most identifiable weaknesses of this approach?*

## ► 6. church abuse

“Do the sexual abuse scandals within the Church call the Christian faith into question?”

### INTRODUCTION

In countries like Australia, Ireland and the USA sexual abuse scandals, particularly where they have involved the abuse of children, have rocked the Church and led many people to feel they can no longer trust the institution. The Church has understandably been called hypocritical because such abuse is against its own moral teaching and because instances of cover-ups have emerged in the very institution that should be protecting the vulnerable people in its care.

Why has this happened and what is the Church doing about this? Can we trust Church leadership in the future? Do the failings of individual Christians count against the faith itself? Can we have any faith in Christianity when some of its leaders have acted so badly? These are the topics for this important episode.

***Watch episode: church abuse***

### UNPACKING THE ISSUE

Our survey revealed that the number one blocker to Christian belief among non-Christian Australians is the issue of hypocrisy and abuse within the Church. When abuse of children occurs within the Church it is an especially deplorable crime and a horrendous breach of trust. It's hard to think of a more appalling obscenity than innocent children entrusted to an institution that is, at its heart, supposed to be about love, care and protection of the vulnerable and the weak, finding instead a place of the worst kind of betrayal and cruelty.

“Some say that priests are no worse than others but that's not good enough. They're supposed to be priests. The Christian message is meant to make some difference.” *Bishop Geoffrey Robinson*



## ***Acknowledging the evil***

The evil done needs to be acknowledged, especially when the issue has been dreadfully mishandled by the Church. The abuse of children is diametrically opposed to the teachings of Christ; cases of sexual abuse and cover-ups deserve to be tagged as the worst type of religious hypocrisy.

“... if people preach moral standards and they don't live by them, they are the worst of sinners in my personal view.” *Patrick Parkinson*

In many instances the Church has failed to support victims and has not had appropriate measures in place to receive and deal with complaints. In the past there was a reluctance to report matters to secular authorities and, in some cases, a sense of trying to protect the name of the institution, rather than trying to provide help for victims. Thankfully churches now have much better practices in place for both guarding against abuse and dealing with it if it occurs.

## ***Exploring the issue of religious hypocrisy***

Sex abuse in the church has added to a common objection to Christianity - that Christians are hypocrites and don't live up to the standards they supposedly aim to achieve. The sexual abuse scandals have led some people to call the whole faith into question, but the failings of Christians do not necessarily discredit Christianity as a whole. Christianity teaches us that each person is fallen and in need of redemption. Christian communities are not a collection of good people. In fact, Christians are more like a “league of the guilty” as Francis Spufford calls it. But Christians believe in God's grace towards flawed and broken people.

## ***Reparation***

Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf, emphasises that Christian forgiveness is hard-edged and reliant on honestly facing wrongs and bringing them into the light. “Full reconciliation cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice done”, he writes.

“I don't think people always equate [abuse] with the Church or Christ unless it is something that the church knows about and ignores. [If] the Church knows about it and ignores it, it's going to take generations to get over it.” *Dale Kuehne*

The Church must adopt a zero tolerance attitude to abuse within its ranks. Speaking truth and seeking justice for victims is now a vital ingredient of

the Church's attempts to reconnect with the community and win back people's trust.

### **Hope**

Both Dale Kuehne and Geoffrey Robinson are victims of past abuse. Robinson has been active in the Catholic Church trying to make a difference for victims. Dale Kuehne is in the midst of recovering from his own sexual abuse, coming to terms with it only later in his life. Kuehne expresses hopefulness in the ongoing process of healing. He is determined to "find a way forward" and to turn to God to help "let the curse [of abuse] stop with me".

"What I can say is, I never equated that pastor's actions with Jesus Christ and I never equated it with the Church. And so, while I can understand why people would be angry at the Church and angry at God for these things that happened to me or to anybody else, this was not what God wanted. This was an abomination. ... It's never changed my understanding of the fact that I need God, that this world needs God." *Dale Kuehne*

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *In what way do the abuse scandals in the Church impact how you feel about the Christian faith itself?*

2. *Mahatma Gandhi, who led India to independence through non-violent resistance, once famously said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ". What sense does it make to distinguish between the teaching and practice of the majority of the Church and the terrible abusive actions of some Christians?*

3. *The Gospel of Matthew records the disciples of Jesus rebuking people for bringing children to him. But Jesus responds by saying, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14). Jesus also denounced hypocrisy of all kinds, perhaps most scathingly in Matthew 23. What do Jesus' words have to say to the issue of abuse in the Church?*

4. *A friend says to you, "I could never accept Christianity because of the cases of abuse in the Church." How do you respond?*

5. *Professor Patrick Parkinson says, "There may be forgiveness. There is for the worst of us. But it's not to be given lightly. And I think forgiveness can follow repentance, a change of life, [but there is] reparation which is saying, "Now what can I do for the victims?" What do you believe is the appropriate response of churches who know that abuse has occurred in their midst? How should they relate to the victims?*

6. *Dale Kuehne says that the abuse he suffered at the hands of a leading pastor has not changed his view of God, his view of Jesus, or his sense of his need for God. How do you explain that?*

# ▶ 7. science and God

“Has science, technology and the modern world shown that we no longer need, nor can we justify, belief in God?”

## **INTRODUCTION**

We live in a ‘scientific age’ and in our modern world the scientific mindset is one that is honoured and elevated. For many, science represents that which is logical and verifiable, whereas religion is seen as superstitious and irrational. Richard Dawkins and the New Atheists claim that science and religion are diametrically opposed and that science has removed the need for God.

Do science and faith go together or are they natural enemies?

***Watch episode: science and God***

## **UNPACKING THE ISSUE**

Supposed tensions between science and religion have been highlighted by the New Atheists. Writers like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins believe that there is nothing beyond the physical realm and that the religious mindset is dangerously irrational and at odds with a scientific mindset. Sam Harris believes that, “There is a price paid whenever an eminent scientist pretends that there’s no conflict between the claims of science and religion”. Yet is this really the case?

### ***Either/Or?***

John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, argues that there shouldn’t be an “either/or” clash between science and faith, but rather they should work together: “both/and” as he calls it. Physicist John Pockinghorne says that science answers the ‘how’s’ in life and religion asks the ‘why’s’.

“Science has purchased its great success essentially by the modesty of its ambition. It only seeks to ask a fundamental question about the world i.e. ‘how do things happen?’ ‘what’s the process of the world?’ Religion is concerned with asking another sort of question, the ‘why’ questions if you like [such as] ... is there meaning and value and purpose in the world?” You need both ... to understand what’s going on.” *John Polkinghorne*

John Lennox believes that the real clash is not between science and belief, but between a ‘naturalism’ that believes this world is all that exists and a ‘theistic’ view of the world that sees a god behind the creation of the world.

### ***The basis of science***

John Lennox notes that science exploded within a theistic context. Quoting C.S. Lewis, he says that human beings became scientific because they expected law in nature, because they believed in the law-giver. “So the basic stance is this – that far from belief in God being a hindrance for science, it was the motor that drove it”, says Lennox.

“I often hear people say, ‘Aren’t you a bit embarrassed about being a scientist and a Christian?’ I reply, ‘How on Earth could I be embarrassed? Christianity arguably gave me my subject.’”  
*John Lennox*

### ***Much ado about Genesis***

“And the first three chapters of Genesis, for example, are not a divinely dictated account to save us the trouble of doing science ... they’re something different and in my view deeper than that. They’re theological rather than scientific in their character and their purpose is to say ‘nothing exists except through the will of God’.” *John Polkinghorne*

Does the Bible claim a six-day creation? Is the world 6000 years old? If this is the case, then the claims of science clash with the claims of the Bible. However, things are more complex than this. Genesis is not intended to be read as a scientific textbook.

“So I don’t think that those six days are meant at all to be a journalistic account in the same way that [for instance] the Gospel of Luke is a journalistic account of what Jesus did.” *Ard Louis*

### ***Much ado about evolution***

Dawkins and others have cited evolution as the key scientific theory that removes the need for God. It is argued that if all life, from the first self-dividing cell through to humans, can be explained by a blind, naturalistic process, then there is no need for God. But being unable to explain how something works does not rule out the idea of a Creator. Evolution cannot explain the origin of life. Evolution only begins when the first self-replicating cell splits. How does this cell come to be?

“Natural science has shown there’s evolution by natural selection. That’s fine but the real question is, is this the ultimate explanation of things or is it due to God? Nevertheless, historically the Darwinian theory has had an enormous influence as to why people give up their religion.” *Richard Swinburne*

### ***Naturalism: give us some answers!***

“The trouble is in the media in our world today. In the West particularly, the idea has come about that the default position is atheism, and every other position must justify itself. Now I don’t accept that.” *John Lennox*

In the same way that Christianity has to be put under the microscope and tested, so must Naturalism, the belief that there is nothing outside of the universe - no God or supernatural elements. So, for example, it is important to ask how Naturalism gives an explanation for the idea of morality. How did the human conscience come about? And what about the natural laws that our world follows? What about the fact that the universe seems to be remarkably well tuned for life.

“If I start from the assumption that there is no God and then I look at the world, it’s rather surprising that the world would have that kind of mathematical character. But if I start from the assumption that there’s a Creator behind the world, it’s not so surprising.” *Ard Louis*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. A friend tells you, "I could never accept Christianity because I am a scientist". How do you respond?

2. The scientist, Erwin Schroedinger (1887-1961) said, "I am ... astonished that the scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experiences in a magnificently consistent order, but is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, god and eternity". What do you see are the limitations of science?

3. Richard Swinburne says "The Darwinian theory of Evolution by natural selection ... is irrelevant as to whether or not there's a God - if there's a God, he is responsible for the evolutionary process". Do you think the idea of evolution is a threat to the Christian faith? Why/Why not?

4. Ard Louis says, "I think people who don't believe in God need to come up with a much better explanation for why our moral sentiments correlate with moral reality or they need to say that moral reality doesn't exist." Do you agree that naturalism cannot adequately account for morality? What other aspects of human experience are hard to match up with an atheistic worldview?

5. According to Richard Swinburne, "that there is an orderly Universe is something very striking, yet beyond the capacity of science ever to explain. Science's inability to explain these things is not a temporary phenomenon, caused by the backwardness of 21st Century science. Rather, because of what a scientific explanation is, these things will ever be beyond its capacity to explain. For scientific explanations by their very nature terminate with some ultimate natural law and ultimate arrangement of physical things, and the questions I am raising are why there are natural laws and physical things at all". How would you answer Richard Swinburne's question? What for you are the most compelling reasons to think there might be a God?

6. "Science can tell us how to build a nuclear bomb. But it can't tell us whether we should use it or not", says Dale Kuehne. Do you agree that we need more than scientific knowledge to live well?



## ▶ 8. homosexuality

“Does the Christian teaching on homosexual practice mean Christians are fearful of, and hateful towards, gay people?”

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1960's sexual revolution, there has been significant change in the morals of Western nations around sexual morality. This has led to changes in what our community views as reasonable and acceptable sexual behaviour.

In modern Western society, an active homosexual lifestyle is increasingly accepted and celebrated as an expression of human sexuality. The push for gay marriage has gained momentum and has been successful in some parts of the West.

By and large the Church teaches that homosexual sex is contrary to Biblical teaching and so this issue places Christians significantly out of step with much of the rest of society. So, is the Church just being homophobic? Is it on the wrong side of history and soon to be laughed at by future generations?

***Watch episode: homosexuality***

### **UNPACKING THE ISSUE**

This issue raises many diverse questions around sexuality, identity, and ideas about marriage. Even matters of Biblical interpretation are of interest to this issue. This topic is extremely sensitive and divisive - and stirs up powerful emotions whenever it is raised.

### ***What makes us human***

“We live in a time in which people have come to define themselves by their sexual orientation...and my belief is that's not at the very heart of who we are. We are human beings, male and female, made in the image of God and loved by God.”

*Dale Kuehne*

Politics professor and church pastor, Dale Kuehne, says that our society is experiencing a fundamental shift in what it means to be human and that we are in the middle of a “crisis in identity”. We live in a time in which people “have come to define themselves by their sexual orientation, their sexual attraction”. Kuehne believes that this limits a person’s identity, which is fundamentally as a human being made in the image of God and loved by God.

“We live in a moment in time in which we’re not merely talking about a change in the way we look at homosexuality. We’re living in a moment in time when we are changing the way we think about human fulfillment and what it means to be human.” *Dale Kuehne*

### ***Thinking about sexuality***

Sexologist, Dr Patricia Weerakoon, argues that when it comes to our sexuality, social issues and environment influence sexual orientation. She argues that there is fluidity in the way our sexuality is formed and argues against the idea of a “gay gene”.

“Now, predisposition doesn’t mean predetermination. So these are people who have a predisposition to same sex attraction but always, always, we have a choice when it comes to behaviour.”  
*Patricia Weerakoon*

### ***What does the Bible teach about homosexuality?***

“The Bible certainly talks about homosexual activity [but] it focuses on activity rather than orientation.” *Michael Jensen*

It’s clear that the Bible condemns homosexual activity both in the Old and New Testaments but this raises interpretation problems for many. Some Christians argue that Old Testament passages condemning homosexual activity are out of date and not in keeping with today’s culture.

Jesus doesn’t make homosexuality a big issue. However, Jesus picks up on a long-standing tradition of Biblical teaching, from Genesis onwards, that clearly sees a relationship between a man and a woman as the ideal. The Bible affirms close, same-gender relationships, but not sexual activity between people of the same sex.

“God is actually not happy with the way we are. He’s not happy with all of us. It’s not as if Christians or the Bible are singling out one group of people and saying you’re worse than everyone else.”  
*Michael Jensen*

The correct Christian response to homophobia is remorse and repentance. Acting out of fear and hate is the antithesis to what Jesus taught. Christians who do not act out of love for homosexual people are denying the faith they claim to be expounding. An orthodox Christian position cannot affirm homosexual practice, but should offer love for the gay person.

“As a Christian community we’ve not done a very good job in speaking the truth in love and compassion. . . . We know that God created man and woman. We know that man and man or woman and woman together sexually is not God’s plan. However, what we fail to do is to see the pain and the grief of calling people to give up something that is actually a created goodness, and that is our longing for sex. And so we somehow have failed to recognise and support that grief.” *Patricia Weerakoon*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *Do you agree with Dale Kuehne’s assessment that individuals in our society now define themselves by their sexual needs and desires? What do you think might be problematic about that approach?*

2. *Is an active sex life essential for human fulfillment?*

3. *For Christians, it's not only gay people who are called to abstain from sexual activity. The only context that the Bible affirms for the expression of sexual intimacy is in the life-long commitment of a man and woman to each other in marriage. How is this relevant to current debates around homosexuality and the Church?*

4. *Do you think some Christians have been guilty of homophobia? If so, what do you think should be the response of the Church to the gay community?*

5. *Do you believe allowing gay marriage is a good idea? Why?/Why not?*

6. *Michael Jensen argues that "while Jesus didn't directly mention homosexuality or homosexual acts as we know them, by inference he's excluding them". What is your response to that?*

*7. Michael Jensen also says that the Bible is a book that tells humans what the creator of the universe says about the way life works best - how relationships, families and communities function optimally. Do you think the Bible should be used as a guide for how people live their lives relationally?*

## 9. the church

“Does the decline of the Church in the West signal the end of Christianity as a force in the world?”

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the eyes of some people today, Christianity is virtually irrelevant and the institution of the Church hopelessly outdated. The decline of the Church in the West in the last 60 years has been steep and dramatic. In the UK regular church attendance - which stood at around 50 per cent in the middle of the 19th century - had, by 2005, declined to 6.3 per cent of the population. Similar patterns are found in other parts of the Western world. In France, only 5 per cent go to church on a weekend and only 10 per cent think religion is important. Australia had a church attendance rate of 44 per cent in 1950. Today it is 17 per cent.

So what is the future of the Church? Will it find a place in a contemporary, fast-paced and technological environment? Does Christianity still have something to offer the 21st Century? That's what we'll be asking in this episode.

***Watch episode: the church***

### **UNPACKING THE ISSUE**

There are certainly challenges for churches to connect with a contemporary audience. Critics will point to the Church's stance on authority, science, women, sex, its exclusivity, or its perceived failure to engage with the world. This all adds up to a picture of a fading relic that has had its day.

These days there are plenty of people who see the emptying out of traditional church buildings as a natural evolution away from superstition and towards a more rational, scientific understanding of reality. But the Church has frequently gone through periods of decline only to be awakened, reformed and reinvigorated. In the West, the traditional institution of the Church may look sick but Christianity is booming in other

parts of the world, notably Africa, South America and Asia. Rumours of the death of religion in the West may well be exaggerated, as new forms of Christian worship continue to grow and thrive.

There are good reasons to believe that Christianity will not die a slow death. In his *Short History of Christianity*, Geoffrey Blainey says that the Christian Church has repeatedly reinvented itself. Essentially Blainey believes that rather than dying out, Christianity is set to continue to evolve and move, to decline and re-emerge just as it always has.

“... but for us [church in India] could be under a tree. It could be in a hotel. It could be in a shed. It could be anywhere. And it can range from a small gathering of 10 or 20 people to a few thousand people coming together. But it’s all about people and communities engaging with communities. So it’s a family ... of believers transforming their community and world that is around them.” *Josy Chacko*

### ***A resilient faith***

The reality is that Christianity remains vibrant and engaging for large sections of the population. The life and teaching of Jesus continues to enthrall those who connect with him and his message. As people in the West increasingly find themselves hungry for meaning, purpose and a sense of transcendence in their lives, Christianity continues to meet that need.

“The moment I encountered Jesus, I knew that there were lots of people like me who were not Christians, not brought up as Christians, who would have felt a similar thing to what I felt, which was a kind of void, a spiritual hunger. What is the ultimate meaning of life? What’s the purpose of life?” *Nicky Gumbel*

The claims that Jesus Christ is ‘God in the flesh’ come to live, die and rise again so that people can be friends with the Creator, if true, will connect with people in any era and in every place. As Christians will attest, their faith provides them with a foundation on which to build lives of purpose and direction and hope. So many people in the West experience abundant provision plus the wonders of modern technology and yet, express deep anxiety and dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, Christianity continues to offer true and abundant life.

“People think the Church is declining but it’s not. Even when you look at it overall, there are places where there is remarkable growth taking place and there are a lot of young people. That’s what I notice here - just this spiritual hunger amongst young people who are outside the church. They really want to know.”  
*Nicky Gumbel*

Further, Christian communities bring together people from all kinds of backgrounds and experiences and call them to unite in love, focusing on caring for each other and people in need. When it operates at its best the Church offers a unique, vibrant and transforming community that remains enormously attractive and compelling. There are good reasons to believe this will continue to be the case, not only in the developing world, but in the West as well.

“I’m confident, no matter what happens, no matter what attacks come, no matter what the waves look like, no matter what the challenges are. If we just stay close and we just follow in the Spirit’s footsteps, He’ll lead us. I think the last couple of thousand years have shown us that rise and fall of the institutional Church. But I think that God’s building it. I’m so confident that God will have His way and if we don’t listen He’ll wait and find someone who does listen.” *Joel A’bell*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Os Guinness says, *“There’s an incredible, infinite capacity to translate [Christianity] into new cultures and new time frames ... But it’s always the original thing you’re translating.”* What aspects of Christianity translate easily into modern culture?

2. Do you agree with Nicky Gumbel that there is a spiritual hunger among young people who are outside the Church? What are the signs of that spiritual hunger?



*3. Do you have a sense of the Church declining in some areas but booming in others? To what would you attribute that growth?*

*4. In this episode, commentators describe the way Christianity is meeting human need. What aspects of the human experience does Christianity meet?*

*5. Historically, Christianity has responded to decline by reforming and evolving to meet new challenges. In what areas do you see the Church adapting to contemporary culture? In what areas might it resist reform - and why?*

*6. The expression of "Church" is going through significant change but the core of the faith remains the same. What is the core of the Christian faith?*

## 10. towards belief

“Will you take the step of faith?”

### **INTRODUCTION**

The past nine episodes have highlighted the faith of a diverse group of people - men and women from across the world who have staked their lives on the claims of the Bible. Their stories recount different experiences on a journey towards belief. Some came to follow Jesus reluctantly, others slowly, while others experienced a dramatic and radical change of direction.

What does it mean to take a step of faith? What does it involve? And what do we do with our doubts about God?

***Watch episode: towards belief***

### **UNPACKING THE ISSUE**

While Sheldon Vanauken was studying Literature at Oxford University, he was also struggling with the validity of Christian faith. He felt it “sort of had the feel of truth” but for him there was a gap between the probable and the proved. He wanted proof, certainty.

He later wrote as he reflected on the gap of belief, it was a question of whether he would accept or reject God. For Vanauken, on the verge of becoming a Christian, he felt it was a “terrible gamble”. He said, “there might be no certainty that there was a God - but there was no certainty that there was not”.

Everyone has faith in a story that orientates them and provides meaning to their lives. Deciding what to put your faith in requires a ‘weighing-up’ of the evidence. But as we have seen in this episode, there are many ways in which people come to faith in God. Amy Orr-Ewing was drawn closer to God after she saw God’s transforming power in the life of her family. For Os Guinness’ wife it was a moment of clarity; a longing for something better. And for Erwin McManus, it was a process of “weeding out everything that seemed false” that brought him to a place where he was convinced about what was true.

## ***Doubt***

Sometimes doubt is seen as the opposite of belief, but doubt doesn't need to be a threat to faith. Coming to faith involves a degree of wrestling and questioning as a person searches for the truth. Os Guinness says, "If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt ... There is no believing without some doubting, and believing is all the stronger for understanding and resolving doubt".

The Bible leaves plenty of room for doubt. In the gospel of Mark a desperate father tells Jesus he is struggling to believe Jesus can heal his son: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" he cries. (Mark 9:24). One of Jesus' disciples, 'Doubting Thomas', is famous for refusing to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, stating, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." (John 20:25). Once Thomas encountered the living Jesus he became a committed follower and is thought to have become an important figure in the early church.

## ***Faith***

Faith in God is not a blind faith. John Lennox describes it as "trusting where there's evidence". He argues that all of us live with faith in something. He uses the example that even scientists need faith "to believe that the universe is rationally intelligible". Christian faith comes down to what could be described as "reasonable trust". Far from being a leap in the dark, it is a leap forward after you have had a chance to look carefully at what's in front of you.

"I began to be attracted to this Christian faith but it was really important to me not to throw my mind out the door and just take a step of blind faith. So at that point I started to search. That took a lot of different forms. I [looked] into the evidence." *Vince Vitale*

## ***Choosing to believe***

"I was praying an agnostic's prayer. I was saying, "God, I don't know if you're there, but if you are, I'd really like to know," and I think that was a very powerful prayer. I think that was something that God honoured and eventually all these threads started to come together and then there was just a time where I decided that I did want to ask God into my life and I asked him if He'd be a part of my life." *Vince Vitale*

Christians believe that God is like a loving parent who longs for a relationship with his children. Unlike the picture some people have of an angry, accusing deity, the God of the Bible is full of mercy. Not only does He desire to forgive us and be in a relationship with us but, as the life of Jesus clearly shows, He is willing to pay the ultimate price on behalf of each of us.

Jesus' parable of the Lost Son, in Luke Chapter 15, beautifully depicts the willingness of God to reach out and offer His love to all who would accept it. This love requires a disposition of at least being open to the reality of who God is and who we are before Him. In the Gospels, Jesus promises that He will find all those who sincerely seek Him.

I was so sceptical ... I'd have a shower in the morning and I would say, "God, I don't know if you're there but I hope you are and if you are, I need a hand." So I'd started. I have a very firm belief that if you open your heart a little bit to God, He'll do the rest."  
*Mike Willesee*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

*1. This episode highlights a number of diverse ways people have come to the Christian faith? What does that diversity tell you about the path to faith and how God meets people in their various life circumstances?*

*2. What do you think it would take for you to have faith in God?*

*3. Are you on a journey towards God?*

*4. Has the Towards Belief series helped you to understand more about the Christian faith?*

*5. To what questions do you still feel the need to find answers?*

*If you would like to take a step towards belief in God, you can do that by praying and opening your life to Him. You may like to use the following prayer to express that step of faith:*

Lord God, I come to you today and take a step of faith and belief. I ask for Your forgiveness for a life of disobeying and ignoring you. Please come into my life today. I thank you for Your forgiveness through Jesus, and for a new start. I pray my life will reflect the choice I have made today. Amen.

***If you have prayed that prayer, make sure you tell a Christian friend or Church pastor about the step you have taken today.***



towards > belief

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