

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

New Edition with Study Guide



*A Guide to What
Matters Most*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION



When I wrote *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? A Guide to What Matters Most*, I expected to be criticized by religious-right fundamentalists. That expectation was met, including by people who accused me of promoting watered-down, minimalist Christianity. These folks obviously read the title but not the book. One infuriated reader wrote me a long e-mail, telling me that my book “would send large numbers of people to hell.” I was taken to task by a Christian talk-radio host who blasted me for “not believing the Bible.” I tried to nuance the difference between believing the Bible, which I do, and believing in strict biblical literalism, which I don't. But he was not interested in having that discussion. A fundamentalist pastor in my community preached an entire sermon series against my book for his congregation, which was not far from my church. Several religious-right believers posted negative reviews about the book on Amazon and various blogs. However, since I fully expected these kinds of responses, they did not particularly bother me or surprise me, although I was grateful that scathing negative responses were relatively few.

What did surprise me was the huge amount of overwhelmingly positive responses I received about the book.

Clearly, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* struck a chord with large numbers of people. Here are a few examples:

- I received e-mails from college students who thanked me for the book, including one who said, "It helped me make sense of my faith."
- A young adult recently e-mailed me to say that the book "helped confirm my call into vocational ministry."
- I received numerous letters from people who said that they were agnostics or atheists but enjoyed the book anyway. One said, "If I were a Christian, I would feel at home in your church." Several told me that they were now rethinking their atheism.
- Dozens of people shared with me profoundly personal stories about their faith struggles and how the book helped them on their journey. One person said, "Your book helped me embrace the God I always wanted to believe in."
- I heard from many readers who thanked me for making the Christian faith accessible to laypeople. One person wrote, "Thank you for articulating theology in a way that doesn't require a theological degree to understand."
- Numerous people told me that the book helped them reclaim their faith. One person said, "This is the book I've been waiting to find for the last twenty years. It helped me realize that I'm not alone in questioning beliefs I have struggled with my entire life. Thank you for helping me find my way back to God."
- Dozens of pastors wrote, telling me that they used the book for small-group studies in their churches, or that they followed the seven-week, congregation-wide initiative based on the book, with positive results. One pastor said, "This is the best church study we've ever experienced, with large numbers of people participat-

ing. Thank you!” Another said, “Your book is a splendid description of a faith that is open-minded but not so open that one’s brains fall out.” One pastor e-mailed, “Your book is both accessible and yet profound. It served as a great tool for our congregation.” A pastor at a large congregation told me that his church gave out copies of the book to guests at their Christmas Eve services.

- Many people wrote asking if I knew where they could find a church that affirmed the theology found in my book. One of them said, “If I could find a church that agrees with your book, I would attend every Sunday.”
- My favorite response was, “Excellent theology, writing, and storytelling. I hope the book gets a huge following and is reprinted a jillion times.”

The overwhelming positive response to *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* along with its strong sales record, tells me that there is a deep hunger in America for a viable alternative to closed-minded faith. Soon after writing the book, I watched an interesting episode of the popular television show *Glee*. In this episode several high school students explain why they are turned off by organized religion. From their perspective, the church is down on gays, women, and science. When you add to that the arrogant and judgmental attitudes found in many religious-right churches, it’s easy to see why religion repels so many people. If the only faith options are fundamentalism or no religion, many people will opt for no religion.

Thankfully, a better alternative exists—vibrant, centrist, open-minded, grace-filled, gender-equal, life-giving, moderate/mainline faith. That’s the message behind *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? A Guide to What Matters Most*. Although the book was written for individual readers, for both seekers and believers, it was also written

for moderate and mainline churches. Therefore, I am delighted that Westminster John Knox Press decided to publish this new edition of the book. This edition includes a comprehensive Study Guide for implementing a seven-week, worship and small-group based, congregation-wide initiative built on the book. This seven-week initiative can help moderate and mainline churches better tell their story to their own members, as well as to unchurched people in their communities. The Study Guide provides church leaders with everything they need to carry out the event, including promotional tools, guidelines for small-group leaders, and worship and sermon ideas.

We in the moderate/mainline tradition have a compelling faith story to tell. However, we need practical resources to better share that story. This new edition of *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* will help you do so boldly. May God's blessings be with you as you read and study and share this book with others. Before long, I plan to write a follow-up book called *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion, but Good Religion*. I hope you will be on the lookout for it!

Martin Thielen

Brentwood, Tennessee
2013

PREFACE



When I first met Danny, he said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe the Bible. I don’t like organized religion. And I can’t stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians.”

In spite of Danny’s avowed atheism and my devout Christian beliefs, we became close friends. Over the next year Danny and I engaged in numerous conversations about God, religion, and faith. During that time Danny softened his stance on atheism. One day, after a long conversation, he announced with a laugh, “I’ve decided to upgrade from an atheist to an agnostic.” Several months later Danny said, “I’ve had an epiphany. I realize that I don’t reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians *package* Christianity.” A few weeks after that conversation, Danny said, “Martin, you’ve just about convinced me on this religion stuff. So I want to know—what’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?”

“What’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?” What a great question! This little book represents my best effort to answer that question. Part I presents ten things Christians *don’t* need to believe. In short, Christians don’t need to believe in closed-minded faith. For example, Christians don’t need to believe that Jews are going to hell or

that it's heresy to believe in evolution. Part 2 presents ten things Christians *do* need to believe — what matters most, if you will. They need to believe in Jesus — his life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection. A great benefit of these beliefs is that they provide promising answers to life's most profound questions, including Where is God? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? And is there hope? Like Danny, many people in the twenty-first century hunger for an alternative expression of Christian faith that's different from the judgmental and narrow-minded caricatures they see on religious television and in the news. This book offers such an alternative. It articulates centrist, mainline, and moderate Christianity in a way that's fresh and easy to understand. It also offers authentic Christian insights that speak to our deepest human needs. So turn the page, and let's begin exploring Danny's interesting question: "What's the least I can believe and still be a Christian?"

PART 1



TEN THINGS CHRISTIANS *DON'T* NEED TO BELIEVE

You've probably heard the old gospel song called "Gimme That Old-Time Religion." The chorus says, "Gimme that old-time religion, gimme that old-time religion, gimme that old-time religion, it's good enough for me." Well, a lot of old-time religion is good and noble, and we'll explore much of it in part 2 of this book. But some old-time religion is neither good nor noble. Old-time religion gave us the Crusades, the Inquisition, and religious wars. Old-time religion oppressed women, defended slavery, and stifled scientific inquiry. The fact is, some of that old-time religion is unhealthy and needs to be discarded. In the chapters that follow, we will review ten tenets of old-time religion that Christians can and should discard.

CHAPTER 1



GOD CAUSES CANCER, CAR WRECKS, AND OTHER CATASTROPHES

Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you.

—Jesus, in Luke 13:2, 3–5

One summer afternoon a country preacher went to visit a farmer in his congregation. As the preacher and farmer sipped iced tea and talked, the farmer's son bolted into the house, carrying a dead cat by the tail. In his excitement the boy did not notice the preacher sitting on the other side of the room. He rushed up to his father, held up the dead cat, and said, "Dad! I found this stray cat in the barn. I hit him with a board, then I threw him against the barn, then I kicked him, and then I stomped him." At that moment the boy saw the preacher. Without missing a beat, he said, "And then, Pastor, the Lord called him home."

God often gets blamed for things God does not do. When I was a teenager, a friend of mine named Rick died

in a car wreck. Rick, a delightful young man and deeply committed Christian, had planned to become a minister. At his funeral the pastor said, "Although we cannot understand it, God's will has been done." Even though I was only sixteen years old and a new Christian, I knew better. God didn't kill my friend Rick: a drunk driver did.

Just last week a young police officer from middle Tennessee lost his life in a traffic accident. His police chief said, "Not knowing how the good Lord makes his decisions sometimes, we were all caught off guard by Jeremy's sudden demise." But it wasn't the good Lord's decision that killed this young man. It was the driver of a pickup truck who ran a red light. If God had actually been the one who killed this fine young policeman, God would not be a "good Lord" at all.

Unfortunately, people attribute awful events to God all the time. A child dies of leukemia, and people say, "God wanted another angel in heaven." A young woman dies of breast cancer, leaving behind a husband and young children, and people say, "God works in mysterious ways." A fifty-year-old man works twelve hours a day, seven days a week, chain smokes, eats unhealthy food, and never exercises. He then suffers a deadly heart attack, and people say, "The Lord knows best." On their prom night two teenagers die in a car wreck, and people say, "God must have had a purpose."

An extreme example of blaming tragedy on God happened after September 11, 2001. Several days after the terrorist attack on New York City, a well-known television preacher claimed that 9/11 was God's retribution for America's sins. He said that abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, and the ACLU had angered God so much that God used the terrorists to punish America. I doubt that theory would go over very well with the families of the victims. Years earlier the same preacher claimed that God

created AIDS to punish homosexuals. Try telling that to the young hemophiliac in my congregation who suffered and then died from AIDS after receiving a contaminated blood transfusion. Or try telling that to children born with AIDS or spouses who get AIDS because their husband or wife was unfaithful. Or for that matter, try telling homosexual men or women, created in the image of God and loved by Jesus, that God gave them AIDS to punish them for their sexual orientation.

A more-recent example of blaming God for tragedy came after the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti. One well-known religious leader suggested that Haiti's suffering was the result of a voodoo "pact with the devil" that Haitian slaves had made two hundred years earlier, during their rebellion against French colonization. That bizarre theory strongly implies that God sent the devastating earthquake to Haiti as a punishment for their past sins. It's beyond my comprehension how Christians can believe that God would purposely annihilate over two hundred thousand people for any reason, much less to punish a poverty-stricken nation for a two-hundred-year-old sin. We need to be careful about attributing terrorist attacks, disease, earthquakes, or other catastrophes to God.

Acts of God?

Last year tornadoes ravaged several communities in my home state of Tennessee. The next night on the evening news, a local official from one of the hardest-hit communities called the tornado "an act of God." When people and property are destroyed in tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones, we often refer to it as "an act of God." But do we really want to believe that? When a tornado rips through a trailer park and kills little children, or a

devastating earthquake kills massive numbers of people, do we really believe that is an act of God? An act of nature, yes. But an act of God? How can we worship a God like that? How can we love and serve a God who inflicts cancer on children, wipes out teenagers in car wrecks, destroys families in tornadoes, or kills hundreds of thousands of people in a tsunami or earthquake?

Christians don't have to believe that. Christians should *not* believe that! The God of Jesus Christ, who placed children on his lap and blessed them, does not go around killing people with tornadoes, earthquakes, cancer, and automobile accidents. God does not have a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute, heart attacks to pass out, or battlefield wounds to inflict.

Just because something bad happens does not mean God causes it to happen. Jesus understood that. We see an example in Luke 13:4–5. Although we don't know the details, eighteen laborers were killed in Jerusalem in an apparent construction accident. People in Jesus' day assumed that God caused the accident, presumably to punish the workers for their sin. Jesus rejected that idea and so must we. In response to this tragedy, Jesus says, "Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you." God didn't cause that tragedy back then, and God doesn't cause tragedies today.

Years ago a woman in my congregation lost her teenage son, Daniel, in a tragic car wreck. At first she felt bitter toward God. Overwhelmed by grief, she said, "I hate God for taking Daniel away from me." Several months later this woman came to realize that God did not "take" her son. With keen theological insight she told me, "It's not God's fault that Daniel is dead. God did not create cars and highways. Daniel's death was just a terrible accident. God did not *take* Daniel. Instead, God *received* him when he came."

Bringing Good Out of Bad

God does not cause cancer, car wrecks, or other catastrophes. God is not the author of suffering. However, that does not mean that God cannot redeem suffering; God can and God does. In fact, God brings good things out of tragedy all the time. For example, take Daniel's mother mentioned above. Whenever anyone in her community loses a child, she's always there. She empathizes with their pain, grieves with them, and helps them walk through their nightmare. In mercy God brought something good out of that sad story. But that does *not* mean God caused the tragedy. As God tells a grieving father in the bestselling novel *The Shack*, "Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies."¹

Suffering is a complex issue for Christian believers and has no simple solutions. We will deal with the problem of suffering in more depth in part 2 of this book. But for now it's enough to affirm that God does not cause pain and suffering. The idea that God does cause pain and suffering is "old-time religion" that Christians can and should abandon.

Many years ago, a few months after I arrived at a new church, I went to visit an inactive member of my congregation. Although he used to attend church regularly, after his wife died, he quit coming. By the time I arrived at the church, he had not attended worship for several years. During our visit I said, "The congregation and I would love for you and your children to return to church."

"Thanks for the invitation," he replied, "but I don't believe in God anymore."

"Tell me about the God you don't believe in," I said.

So he told me his story. Years earlier, he, his wife, and their two young children came to church every Sunday. But then his wife developed breast cancer. In spite of all

their prayers and the best medical treatment available, she only got worse. He begged God to save her, but she died anyway. He told me, “When I buried my wife, I also buried my faith. I don’t believe in a God who kills twenty-eight-year-old mothers with cancer.”

I replied, “I don’t believe in that kind of God either.”

* * *

Bottom line: *Although God can and does bring good results out of tragedy, God does not cause tragic events to occur.*

Note for Chapter 1

1. William P. Young, *The Shack: A Novel* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 185.



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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY GUIDE



Mainline and moderate Christians have a compelling faith story to tell. And Americans, more than ever, are eager to hear that story. In postreligious-right America, people are hungry for vibrant, grace-filled, open-minded, centrist, mainline faith. *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* can help your church proclaim the good news of mainline and moderate faith to your community.

What Is It?

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? is a seven-week, easily implemented, worship and Sunday school-based, congregation-wide initiative for mainline and moderate churches.

How Can It Help Your Church?

This unique local-church initiative can help energize your congregation, reach new people, make your church more visible in your community, attractively communicate moderate and mainline faith, wake up your Sunday school

classes, and help prepare seven weeks of sermons and worship services without impacting your church budget.

How Does It Work?

The program has three basic components. First, participating churches will encourage their congregation to read an engaging new book about mainline faith called *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* Since individual members and not the church will purchase the books, it will not impact the church budget. Second, church leaders will plan seven compelling sermons, worship services, and Sunday school lessons around the content of the book. Sermon helps and small-group lesson plans are provided in this Study Guide. Third, church members will use the book and seven-week event to invite and welcome people to their church. Comprehensive promotional helps for inviting and welcoming people are also included in this Study Guide.

Author Information

Martin Thielen currently serves as senior pastor of Brentwood United Methodist Church, Brentwood, Tennessee, one of the largest United Methodist Churches in America. Before moving to Brentwood, Martin served as senior pastor of First United Methodist Church, Lebanon, Tennessee. During his tenure the church has experienced significant revitalization and growth. Martin has a bachelor of arts, a master of divinity, and a doctor of ministry degrees, along with a year of PhD coursework at Vanderbilt University. He served for four years as a national worship and preaching editor and consultant for the SBC. He has led

more than one hundred church leadership workshops for ministers across the country. He also served as an adjunct professor of worship and preaching at a seminary. Writing for publication has long been an important part of Martin's ministry. He has written five books, four of them on the subject of worship and preaching, and more than one hundred articles. His doctor of ministry project was "Ministering to Ministers through Writing." Martin's preaching and worship Web site can be found at www.GettingReadyForSunday.com.

PAGES FROM THIS STUDY
GUIDE HAVE BEEN
REMOVED FOR THIS
SAMPLE

Week 1: (Don't) Gimme That Old-Time Religion

Bottom Line of Lesson

Some old-time religion is unhealthy and needs to be discarded.

Scripture Texts

Matthew 9:16–17

Matthew 19:3–9

Matthew 23:13–15, 25–28

Brief Commentary on the Texts

Matthew 9:16–17: Jesus speaks of old wineskins, a reference to the old-time religion of his day. Jesus said that sometimes new wineskins are needed because some old-time religion isn't worth keeping.

Matthew 19:3–9: In Jesus' day old-time religion allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason. In a day without alimony, child support, or public assistance of any kind, it usually left her with two options: begging or prostitution. That was old-time religion, and Jesus completely rejected it.

Matthew 23:13–15, 25–28: Jesus chastises some of the religious leaders of his day for their toxic faith, especially their arrogance, pride, and hypocrisy.

Sunday Morning at the Movies

To help introduce the theme, consider showing the final two to three minutes of the movie *Religulous*. This film argues that all religion is toxic and needs to be discarded. It could spark spirited dialogue about the subject of unhealthy religion.

Discussion Starters

1. In the preface of the book, the author tells a story about a young man named Danny:

When I first met Danny, he said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe the Bible. I don’t like organized religion. And I can’t stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians.”

In spite of Danny’s avowed atheism and my devout Christian beliefs, we became close friends. Over the next year Danny and I engaged in numerous conversations about God, religion, and faith. During that time Danny softened his stance on atheism. One day, after a long conversation, he announced with a laugh, “I’ve decided to upgrade from an atheist to an agnostic.” Several months later Danny said, “I’ve had an epiphany. I realize that I don’t reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians *package* Christianity.”

Can you relate to Danny’s comments? What “packages” of Christianity turn you off? Why?

2. What examples of unhealthy religion do you see in the world today?

3. Read Matthew 23:13–15, 25–28. In this passage, Jesus condemns the toxic faith of some of the religious leaders of his day. How does this text make you feel? Does it trouble you to hear Jesus speak such harsh words? Why was Jesus so unhappy with these people? (If time permits, read and discuss the other two texts listed above.)

4. In recent years several popular books have been arguing that all religion is toxic and therefore needs to

be rejected. Examples include *The God Delusion* and *God Is Not Great*. The film *Religulous* makes the same argument. (This would be a good time to show the movie clip mentioned above.) How do you respond to the argument that all religion is unhealthy and needs to be abandoned?

5. In the introduction to part 1, the author says:

A lot of old-time religion is good and noble, and we'll explore much of it in part 2 of this book. But some old-time religion is neither good nor noble. Old-time religion gave us the Crusades, the Inquisition, and religious wars. Old-time religion oppressed woman, defended slavery, and stifled scientific inquiry. The fact is, some of that old-time religion is unhealthy and needs to be discarded. In the chapters that follow, we will review ten tenets of old-time religion that Christians can and should discard.

The author then reviews ten tenets of old-time faith that he thinks we should discard. We don't have time to review all those today or even in this seven-week study, but we can return to them later. Let's quickly review those ten chapter titles. (Have the class look at the contents, part 1.) Which of these chapter titles do you tend to agree with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones would you like to study after the seven-week initiative is over?

Who's Not Here?

Before you conclude today's class, talk about people who could be invited to the class, both church members and potential members. Get volunteers from your class to call and invite each person named to the remainder of the seven-week study.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, we are all capable of having unhealthy religion. Forgive us when we let our religion become unhealthy. Help us instead to have vibrant, healthy, life-giving faith. Empower us to live out that kind of faith and to share it with others. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.