

**Impressions on Reading:**

**The Case for Faith,  
A Journalist Investigates  
the Toughest Objections to Christianity**

**by Lee Strobel  
(Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000)**

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**I acquired this book as a Christmas gift. It was a gift from my very good Christian friend Dan Kane, whose online book I reviewed last year in my Early Christianity book-review series. Thanks, Dan!**

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**Strobel's "Introduction" describes his interview with a former believer, a co-evangelist with the world famous Billy Graham who turned into an unbeliever and wrote a book about it. The man's name is Charles Templeton, and I found myself identifying with his point of view, largely. He has immense respect for Jesus; he uses superlatives about his life that typically are not used by a non-believer.**

**Strobel's title, "The Case for Faith," appealed to me because of my recent readings. I thought he would make a case for faith that would, like Marguerite Porete did, ask you to follow your feelings, your heart, and set aside those contradictory facts your intellect feeds on and delights me. I thought the reason he was introducing Templeton at the very beginning was to set up his eight solid intellect-based reasons for not believing as straw**

**men, and then argue for faith as the way to gain and maintain belief despite these so-called facts.**

**He gets into this very discussion on pages 9 through 11 where he describes Templeton being converted by a spiritual experience and afterward saying that**

**But soon doubts began gnawing at Templeton. “I had gone through a conversion experience as an incredibly green youth,” he recalled later. “I lacked the intellectual skills and the theological training needed to buttress my beliefs when—as was inevitable—questions and doubts began to plague me. . . . My reason had begun to challenge and sometimes to rebut the central beliefs of the Christian faith.”**

**Strobel, by contrast, turns to the autobiography of Billy Graham who goes through the same struggle but takes a step` that leads to a very different outcome:**

**Gripping a Bible, Graham dropped to his knees and confessed he couldn’t answer some of the . . . questions that Templeton and others were raising. . . . “At last the Holy Spirit freed me to say it, ‘Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by *faith!* I’m going to allow my faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.’”**

**Strobel quotes Graham saying he knew then that a great inner battle had been won, and the rest of his life attests to the genuineness of that key moment’s inner conversion. Marguerite Porete would have been proud, but I got the**

**impression that Strobel was not. He suggests that one does not need to set aside intellect in order to have true faith:**

**For me, having lived much of my life as an atheist, the last thing I want is a naïve faith built on a paper-thin foundation of wishful thinking or make-believe. I need a faith that is consistent with reason, not contradictory to it; I want beliefs that are grounded in reality, not detached from it. . . .**

**So, Templeton then sets out to provide factual refutations of Charles Templeton's eight theses against the Christian faith. These theses or themes become his chapter headings. They are listed on page 20 and can be summarily paraphrased as:**

- 1. How can there be a loving God and pain and suffering?**
- 2. How can one believe in miracles in modern times?**
- 3. Why is a God needed when evolution explains life?**
- 4. How can you believe in a just God given Old Testament atrocities?**
- 5. How can Jesus be the only way to heaven when so many never heard of him?**
- 6. How can a just God punish people eternally in hell for not believing?**
- 7. How can Christians believe when Christianity has been cruel and violent?**
- 8. Can you be a Christian if you have doubts?**

**I read portions of the chapters relating to all of the above, several of them word for word. Am I impressed by the facts? No. Strobel's modus operandi was to interview theologians and Christian philosophers for each of his topics. I got a kick out of the "fact" (my point of view) that some resorted to a discussion of what is known on the subject, which is good, they**

set the issue in perspective, which is also good. Then, after all that, several grounded themselves by making statements of faith. It gave me pleasure to note this because I felt as I first read Strobel's statement on page 20 of needing, and thus promising, facts only, that he was setting himself up for failure. I suppose an expert's testimony to his faith (all his sources are men) becomes a fact. This is often the case in court with expert witness testimony. But I am the jury here, and I am not convinced Strobel makes a fact-based case for any of his refutations of Templeton's first seven theses. Obviously you can be a Christian and have doubts. Most do.

I was amused, on page 71 in Strobel's Chapter 2 on miracles, of how easily and harshly his expert threw out Mormonism's claims to genuine miracles. Words like "plain charlatanry," "elaborate hoax," "unreliability" and "blatant lack of corroboration" are used. This is in contrast, of course, with the story of Jesus as told by Paul which was . . . "written down within the first generation when the eyewitnesses were still alive." My recent readings have convinced me that it isn't quite that simple in either case, and the faith of the adherents to the religion founded by both is genuine, perhaps in spite of the facts concerned rather than because of the facts.

Speaking of Mormonism (which is not what this book is about), it is mentioned again in a sentence on living right on page 156 in Chapter 6. The point is that living right is important, but not as important as believing right, believing in Christ. Mormonism is not singled out as a non-Christian religion, Christians are mentioned in the same sentence with Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Mormons. But as I got to the chapter on "hell" I was really, really amused: the expert being interviewed in that chapter (6) described hell in the same general terms the Mormons use describe the lower heavens. It is not a place of

torture, but a place where you are divorced from God to a degree that depends on the character you have built while on earth. Mormons do not believe hell is for children, neither does the expert though his reasons differ. Mormons believe even the worst people will eventually merit one of the lower kingdoms where the Holy Ghost will minister to them. The middle heaven is visited and ministered to by Christ. The higher heaven is in the presence of the Father and the Son. It is the same scheme of degrees of separation from God as described in Strobel's book, though I know the details would not match since the Christian definition of Jesus as God doesn't allow this sort of physical separation from the Father.

But what I really wanted to read about in Strobel's book was the discussion of those who never heard of Christ. This discussion is on pages 160 through 163 in Chapter 5. The expert agrees with Strobel that it isn't fair to condemn those who have no chance to hear of Christ. In answer he calls on trust in God, an act of faith, for the assurance that those who really desire God in their hearts will be found by God and will hear of Christ in this life. He assures Strobel that God can do such things, . . . "there are ways that God can minister to them that are beyond our understanding." This all refers to those currently alive, of course, not the dead who lived, for example, before Christ and in places where there was no teaching of Judaism either, which, according to Christians, had people looking forward to Christ.

Strobel really digs into the idea that it is not fair to have God condemn really good people in that category, like Mahatma Gandhi for example, who heard of Christianity, admired Christ, but not Christians (page 150). On page 157 he asks why Gandhi the good person was not saved while some really bad people turned Christians are saved (a serial killer who

**found Christ in jail is used as an example on page 160). The answer is that if we were to have to depend on our righteousness we would all go to hell. Salvation is about faith in Christ. Behavior is important, but not as important. Scripture is cited, I guess that makes it factual for Strobel.**

**All in all I see the interviews as marking these people, including Strobel himself actually, as persons making a living off their ministry, hence their necessity to maintain their belief against all odds. Hence their ability to see proof where I see nothing of the sort if not the opposite. The chapters on miracles and evolution did nothing for me either, it is just expert versus expert and all through the book the arrogance of Christianity mentioned on page 148 is well illustrated.**

**The more thoughtful chapter, I thought, was 7 on the cruelty and violence of the Christian churches in history. The expert here agrees that Catholicism in its Inquisition “lost it way” and protestants dealt inappropriately when suppressing heretics as well (page 208). The discussion of the Crusades suggests they were, in some small part at least understandable in terms of motives, given the times. But this is not to be confused with Christian teachings. They were slaughters of unimaginable ferocity and magnitude. Christ would not have agreed with them. (Pages 204-207)**

**The expert then puts things into perspective by discussing the good Christianity has done in the world and still does. And the hope it gives its adherents. Can’t argue with that. But I take exception to the idea (that came up repeatedly in the book in the science chapter as well as here) that without Christianity there is little “meaning, hope and beauty and richness” in the world (page 217). On that page there is also a claim that Christianity reveals “the meaning of life and the existence of**

**universal morality.” This is in the same book that saves a serial killer for believing, and condemns a saint for not believing. I have little patience with that being a good example of either a purpose for life or evidence for an ultimate morality.**

**Strobel makes reference to his previous book, *The Case for Christ*, several times, and summarizes it as an Appendix in this book. Where he sums up what he has done in this book, he refers to his previous book’s thirteen experts testifying to the reality and deity of Christ as well as the evidence discussed in this book. Given all this evidence, Strobel is now ready to summarize his discussion of the big 8 objections to Christianity based on Charles Templeton’s book (p. 252):**

**Every single one of “The Big Eight” objections needs to be weighed in the light of this overwhelming positive evidence for the existence of God and the deity of Jesus Christ. For example, as Peter Kreeft [one of his experts] conceded in our interview, the suffering in this world does constitute some evidence against the existence of God—but in the end it’s buried by an avalanche of *other* evidence that he does exist, that he does love us, and that he can even redeem our suffering and draw good from it. This mountain of evidence can give us confidence that even though we may not fully understand why there’s suffering or why hell exists, we can trust that God is just, that he is acting appropriately, and that someday we’ll have a deeper explanation.**

**On page 255 Strobel acknowledges the need for “a will to believe” as a prerequisite to faith. There are no “perfect and complete answers” to “The Big Eight objections.” Strobel suggests that “in the end” . . . “Faith is about a choice, a step of**

the will, a decision to want to know God personally.” So, what Billy Graham did was, after all, the correct example for all would-be believers.

On page 259 Strobel boils the acquisition of faith down to “a three-word process—*investigation*. . .*decision* . . . *transformation*”—and testifies to his own experience as a response to the evidence that entailed a decision to “abandon atheism and cling to Christ.” He then testifies to the marked improvements that have occurred in every aspect of his life since that decision.

The book ends on a note of hope. Billy Graham has just had a very nice visit with his old partner Charles Templeton, and a copy of this book is being sent to Charles, his wife has promised to read it to him. So, even for Charles there is hope. Unless, of course, his Alzheimer’s is too advanced to allow him to understand what the book is all about, or, if he is anything like me, he will simply not be convinced.

I will be reading, but probably not reviewing, Strobel’s previous book, *The Case for Christ*, because his summary of that book on pages 263-269 shows me that it covers material I already covered in my book reviews on early Christianity last year. Nothing in Strobel’s summary indicated to me that I had overlooked something that would change my mind about my conclusions. Nevertheless, I will read it.