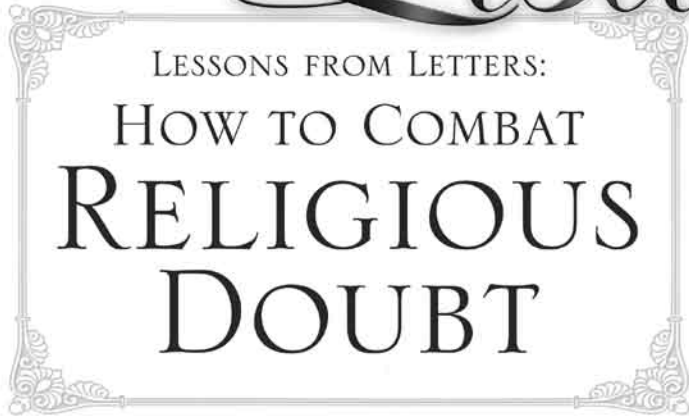


# *Dear Lisa*



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DEDICATION

*To Cindy,  
You're still the one.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Book titles can be tricky things. Often a title may whet our appetite for one thing while the book may actually be about something entirely different. So let me explain what this book is all about.

I have always been in contact with many people who have not accepted the concept of God as he is set forth in the traditional world religions. These people are not Christians, Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists, but neither are they atheists. They often describe themselves as spiritual. They have a strong sense of the necessity of good moral conduct and realize the importance of the obligation each of us has to make this world a better place. They believe there is a Higher Power or Presence, but they are dissatisfied with God as they have heard him presented in Christian circles. They may even say, "I believe there is Something out there, but I am not sure how to define that Something." I refer to such people as God-seekers.

The term God-seekers is one I arrived at after much deliberation. In Acts 17:27 Paul said it was God's desire that all people should seek him, but he described some as seeking him like a blind man feels or gropes his way around. Now the term *gropers* or *feelers* sounded decidedly unflattering. *God-seekers* won by default.

This book is a series of letters between me and a God-seeker named Lisa. Lisa is actually a composite of the many God-seekers I have met, not a personal acquaintance.

Who might benefit from this work? One obvious group is seekers. The forces rallied against Christianity are running a rather successful disinformation campaign. Many who fancy they are rejecting Christianity aren't actually rebelling against what Jesus taught. Instead they are opposed to what someone has wrongly told them Jesus taught. The discrediting example of some Christians often contributes to the problem. I desire to at least set the record straight, allowing the seeker to accept or reject an accurate portrayal of Christianity.

But more than any other, Christians will derive the greatest benefit from this work. Christians are charged always to be "ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15 NASB). This book is to help equip Christians to meet that obligation.

This work sets forth many of the questions seekers are asking, for they aren't always the questions Christians are accustomed to answering. Our usual concept of a religious discussion involves someone that already has a fairly accurate view of the Bible as being the word of God

and Jesus as being the divine Son of God. Our usual exchange begins with topics like how to be saved, the identity of the church, or whether or not one can fall from grace. But the world we live in is a bit more skeptical than it once was. Now we must often prove that the biblical concept of God is the correct concept.

It is also my desire to address with *brevity* the questions seekers are asking. In addressing the concerns of seekers, Christians may feel as if they are expected to be experts in the minute details of religion, science, ancient languages, and archaeology. This is, in part, because much of the discussion that takes place about issues important to seekers is really about peripheral matters. I have refrained from getting lost in the peripheral details, confining my responses to the nucleus of the question that is being addressed. This makes for brief but convincing answers.

Finally, I have chosen this correspondence format for the book so that I might write in the second person. My desire is to create an atmosphere that sounds more like two people chatting about the weather or the condition of the wallpaper, rather than saying things like, “Now *they* believe this or that.” None of us likes to be referred to in the third person. It is a bit like being a party to a conversation that is wholly about you, but the speakers act as if you weren’t in the room. My hope is that the responses in the dialogue of the book have the gentle tone Peter called for when Christians “give an answer.”

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is written to be used in two ways. One may simply read it from beginning to end as a series of letters. Reading the book in this fashion allows one to become acquainted with the relationship of the two main characters as the correspondence develops and as their lives unfold in the letters.

On the other hand, the busy Bible class teacher may not be interested in the entertainment value associated with the development of the characters. For this reason the contents reveals the 13-part division of the material covered as well as the specific topics addressed, making it possible to use the book in a Bible class without the story line, or even as a reference work.

To any seekers who read this work: This book is a presentation of Christianity. It is an attempt to answer questions and address issues that the many God-seekers I have met in life have raised. If I fail to be convincing, then my hope is that you will keep seeking him.

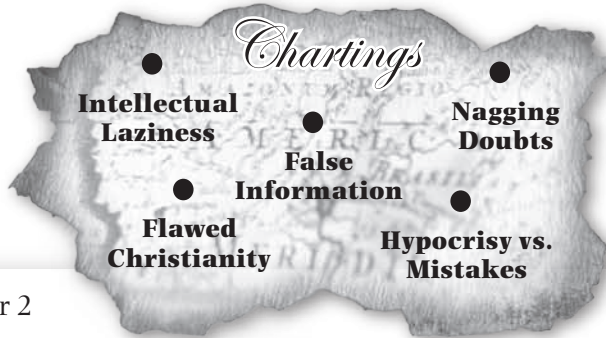


# Dear Lisa



## What Is Truth?

### THE SEARCH BEGINS



October 2

*Dear Lisa,*

During the past year we have had quite a few conversations about religion and life philosophy in general. I have really enjoyed and benefited from our conversations. But I am always left with the feeling we didn't really finish what we started, and there is always uncertainty as to when we will be able to talk again. Besides, it is almost impossible to really pick up where you left off. For those reasons I have taken the liberty of beginning this written correspondence with you. I hope I am not being too forward about this, but our conversations have convinced me that you really are interested in spiritual matters, so we might as well dig in and see if together we can solve some of these dilemmas.

As you know, I am a Christian and I believe Christianity is the answer for people seeking God. But you have mentioned several times you are reluctant to accept Christianity as a means of finding

# Dear Lisa Lisa

God. What is it specifically about the Movement that makes you so hesitant to accept its teachings?

There are several possible answers to this question. Maybe some of the presentations you have seen of Christianity have been flawed. The flaw may be, to put it simply, that someone got it wrong. Unfortunately, many “Christians” really don’t understand what Christianity teaches. Some of our more zealous advocates are not among our best informed. Some people refuse to allow their own ignorance to keep them down, even when it really should.

Another possibility is that some of the Christian conduct you have witnessed has been defective. When a person professes to be of a certain conviction, it is only natural that people should begin to look at him to see what kind of people are of the conviction he professes. When the one making a certain profession behaves badly, the profession is tainted. This is especially true when a person says he acted with the approval, or even at the instigation of God. This inevitably seems to lead to the charge of hypocrisy. For this reason the Bible itself often urges Christians to behave themselves properly so as not to bring shame on the name of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:12–19; 1 Timothy 6:1).

I offer no defense for poor behavior on the part of any of my fellow Christians. My own behavior is sometimes all too short of what I proclaim. But I hope as you consider these examples of poor conduct, you are willing to differentiate between sincere people making mistakes (sometimes even bad mistakes), and insincere people who are pretending to be something they are not.

Here is another word of caution. To invalidate an entire religious system based on your knowledge of the conduct of some of its followers may be a sign of intellectual laziness. To say you saw several Christians misbehave is not the same as actually studying what Jesus taught about Christian behavior.

I wish everything you find objectionable about Christianity is simply representations that do not accurately portray what Jesus taught; however, I realize that is too much to hope for. I am certain some of the things you find objectionable reflect true Christian teaching. The best I can hope for is to offer some thoughts from a different perspective—the kind of thing where you say, “I never thought of it quite that way before.”

Be assured, I have no intention of changing the teachings of Christianity to make it more acceptable. I believe I have an obligation to both you and God. I must present Christianity as I have come to believe it—the only way we can honestly present anything—because I believe God would have it no other way. Jesus himself had no desire to gain followers under false pretenses. That is why some of his speeches left him with fewer rather than more followers (John 6:60–71).

My obligation to you, Lisa, rises from my conviction that no decision should ever be based on false information. Your quest for God is the most important thing you have to do in your life. You should not be lied to.

One final word: In matters as important as these, few people become convinced in one great cataclysmic moment. I hear a lot about that great moment when the whole thing suddenly made sense—when one previously skeptical of Christianity came to accept the entire teachings of Jesus in the twinkling of an eye. But for most of us (certainly for me) accepting is a process. It takes a while because some things are more readily received than others. Many become Christians though nagging doubts may remain about some aspects of Jesus' teachings. Some may even accept a little begrudgingly. That is only natural. Some of what Jesus taught runs contrary to personal desires. But most mature people realize that what we want (desire) is not always what's best for us. Being a Christian is a continual process of growing and not an action one completes in a moment (2 Peter 3:18).

The biggest mistake seekers can make is to end their examination prematurely. The nagging little doubts often go away as one's understanding grows more complete. Truth comes in small bits like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that, by themselves, don't look like much, but together make perfect sense. The problem is, many people don't stick around long enough to see the whole picture.

I hope to hear from you soon.

*Your friend,*  
*Gene*



SOUNDINGS

1. Is one a hypocrite just because he does or teaches something that is wrong? Defend your answer.
2. When someone questions Christianity, why should we consider his circumstance before responding? Contrast the way Paul answered the people of Athens (Acts 17:16–34) with the way he answered those in Acts 13:42–47.
3. An example of intellectual laziness is (a) examining a religious movement (b) examining the conduct of a person from a religious movement.

## HOW PREJUDICE HIDES GOD



October 7

*Dear Lisa,*

Thanks for replying to my letter.

I did not realize you had been thinking seriously about spiritual matters for such a long time. I understand why, in view of your long search, you feel there really isn't any one true way to find God.

Sometimes the secret to finding something is not in how hard we look, but in how we look. This is especially true when we are looking for something and we are only vaguely aware of what it looks like. We get a picture in our mind of what the thing looks like, but if our picture is wrong, then it really messes everything up. We could be staring at the real thing without recognizing it.

Most of us—especially men—have had the rather embarrassing experience of claiming a certain item was not in a kitchen cabinet, only to have it later produced from that same cabinet, usually by our wives. Often the problem was we were looking for a red label when the label was actually blue. Our own expectation of what the item should look like actually prevented our finding it.

One reason Jesus was rejected was because he did not fit the preconceived idea as to how the Messiah should look and act. Those who crucified him had expected the Messiah to establish a physical kingdom and rule over it as an earthly monarch. On one occasion they even tried to “take him by force and make him a king,” but he refused (John 6:15). God doesn’t always act the way we think he should, which is a good thing. Unfortunately, determining in our minds how God ought to act increases the difficulty of our finding him.

I admire you because you are a caring and loving person. Injustices really get you worked up because you have a well-defined sense of justice. Though you claim to have a rather vague concept of God, you may have a more definite idea of God than you realize. God, by definition, is a loving and caring Being who champions the cause of the weak when they are trampled by the strong. Like you, he loves justice and hates injustice.

Since you already have very strong ideas about important matters such as love, justice, and the importance of looking to the needs of others, I suspect you are looking for a God who shares your ideas on these matters. In other words, you have an idea of the color of the label. You have certain expectations of how God ought to believe and behave, and any view of God that does not meet your expectations is likely going to be rejected. There is a biblical story that illustrates that very concept. (Read 2 Kings 5.)

Lisa, please don’t be insulted, but what if at least some of your ideas about love, justice, and morality are wrong? What if something you consider to be an injustice is really not unjust at all? What if a certain behavior that, in your mind, is the loving thing to do really isn’t loving at all? I know that is hard to imagine. Because of your passions about such things, it is difficult to believe you could be that far off. But if you are wrong about at least some of these matters, it would mean God might look considerably different from what you imagined. This much I know: if the movie depictions reveal the

# Dear Lisa Lisa

concept people have of the Almighty, the true God is very different from what they seek. He is not anything like Bruce Almighty or George Burns.

There is a temptation to say, “I just can’t believe I could be that far off about these things.” That is a stronger statement than you may realize. It really amounts to a claim of omniscience. It is setting oneself up as being capable of judging God, and that is a pretty lofty position. The biblical teaching is that God is high above man, so God’s ways and thoughts are not always in agreement with ours (Isaiah 55:8–9; Jeremiah 10:23). We simply cannot assume that the correct concept of God is the one we have created independently in our mind.

The search for God is a search for truth, not for a Supreme Being who believes like me. You and I have discussed the concept of truth on a number of occasions. There is a lot of disagreement about what truth is, and whether or not it can really be known. Some believe it is possible for something to be both true and not true at the same time and in the same way. That makes for nice philosophical discussion, but creates havoc when applied to real life situations. That’s why many people who espouse certain ideas about truth do not actually live by those ideas. People often speak of “the truth as you see it” when referring to religious matters. However, when it comes to the day-to-day decisions of life, such a concept isn’t very practical.

Are you ready for a really profound idea? Here it is: if something is true, then it is true. Now I am sure that is a rather disappointing statement considering the build-up it received. But that idea is important because it takes truth out of the realm of how I feel about something and makes it objective, rather than subjective. And here is something else that is great about that idea concerning truth: deep down we all really believe it because we live by it in the normal affairs of life.

A few months ago you got a new car. Your car is white, as I recall. Now why is your car white? Is it white because I believe it is white? No, it is white because it is white. White is its color. Now when you went to pick your car up from the dealer, if they had brought out a red one you would have said something like, “Hey, that’s not the car I ordered. I ordered a white car and that one is red.” And if the salesman had said to you, “Well, to me that car is white,” you would not have thought for a moment he might be right. It wouldn’t have

mattered how the salesman felt about the color of the car, because if it is red then it is red. And if it is red then it can't be white. It can't be both (assuming we aren't talking about a two-tone paint job).

That is how we deal with truth in the normal affairs of life, and things could get pretty hectic if people acted differently. Since we hold to this rather practical view of truth daily, I see no reason we should suddenly get impractical about religious truth. If something is true, then it is true.

Isn't simplicity wonderful!

*Your friend,  
Gene*



SOUNDINGS

1. Discuss the effect of Naaman's preconceived expectations on his responses to the prophet's command (2 Kings 5:9–14).
2. What, if anything, is wrong with that statement "truth as you see it"?
3. What factor or factors make learning the truth difficult?



EXAMINING CHRISTIANITY  
MEANS EXAMINING JESUS



October 12

*Dear Lisa,*

In your last letter you mentioned your mother has been sick. Is she better? If there is something I can do to help, please let me know.

I was intrigued by your comment that it seems strange to you God should be so difficult to find. You wonder why he doesn't make himself more obvious.

Let me make an alternate suggestion to your hypothesis that God is hard to find. No search can be successful if the searcher is looking in the wrong place. If you want to find fish you must look in the water. If you are looking in the desert for fish, you are not more likely to find them just by looking harder. The diligence of the search is not the problem. It goes without saying that we cannot blame the fish, because we are looking in the wrong place. Neither should we blame God when we cannot find him if we are looking in the wrong place.

Many God-seekers are looking in the wrong places for him. Some who have rejected Christianity—often called “organized religion”—aren't necessarily rejecting the teachings of Jesus. They may not know the teachings of Jesus. They are irked at some who claim to be his followers. They are rejecting the guy who bombs abortion clinics, the preacher caught in a money scandal, or the Sunday school teacher accused of molesting children. Many do horrible things in the name of Jesus, but that doesn't mean Jesus approves of their actions. The point is, you won't find Jesus by looking at the conduct of a few nuts who claim to be his followers.



Many of your objections to Christianity have to do with issues. That is not unusual. Many people say they could never accept the Christian faith because of its views on abortion, capital punishment, gender roles, sexual conduct, or even the environment.

Perhaps you have received misinformation about Christianity, but there is a more fundamental matter: this is really just another example of looking for God in the wrong place. You really can't begin searching for God by looking at issues. It is like saying, "I'll know when someone is teaching the truth about God because it will look just like my concept of God." Should we make ourselves the standard by which God is judged?

The truthfulness of Christianity is based on whether or not the claims Jesus made about himself are true. The Bible teaches that in Jesus, God "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1–3, 14). One of the men who wrote about the life of Jesus specifically said it was his aim to prove "Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:30–31). If Jesus was God, then any disagreements we have with him are settled. What could you possibly say to him? "Sir, I know you are divine but there are a couple of things you taught with which I must take issue." That is not very likely.

If Jesus is not who he claimed to be, then why consider Christianity at all? If he wasn't who he said he was, then the entire Christian movement is built on a guy who was either a lunatic who thought he was God or a liar who wanted people to believe he was God. Neither option inspires great confidence.

Look at it this way. If you are looking for a bottle of medicine the logical place to first look is the medicine cabinet. If it isn't there, then look somewhere else. The logical place to begin examining Christianity is Jesus, and the only detailed information we have about Jesus is in the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If you are really interested in determining whether or not Christianity is the correct concept of God, then read what those who knew him best wrote about him. If after looking at the person of Jesus you still aren't satisfied, then look somewhere else.

*Your friend,*  
*Gene*



## SOUNDINGS

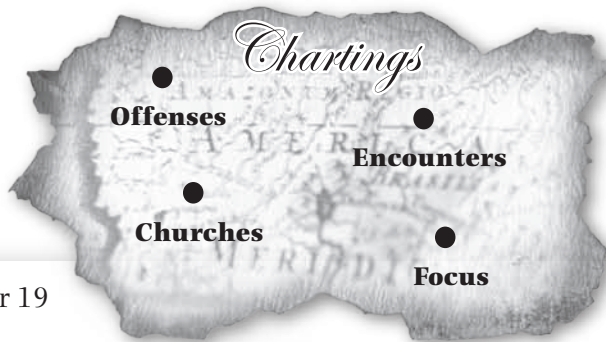
1. Among the people who reject Christianity, what percentage has actually read the Bible?
2. If people reject Christianity without having read the Bible, what might be the basis for their rejection?
3. In Romans 1:18–25 Paul condemns people who rejected knowledge of God as he is revealed in nature. How does nature point to the existence of God? What can we know about God from nature?

# Dear Lisa



## Things That Hinder a Search for Truth

OVERCOMING THE BAD EXAMPLE  
OF SOME BELIEVERS



October 19

*Dear Lisa,*

I am very sorry to hear of your recent experience with a church-going person. I wish I could say yours is the first case where a professing Christian did someone a nasty turn, but it's not. I do hope you can get your money back. I also hope that individual turns away from that kind of behavior. Eventually they will encounter the One who said, "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Matthew 18:7). A Christian should conduct himself in such a way as to cause others to glorify God (Matthew 5:13–16).