



*Finding Faith—A Search for What Makes Sense*  
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# Contents

<i>Foreword by Steve Chalke</i>	9
<i>Preface: A Note to My Readers</i>	13
<i>Introduction: Why Is the Search for Faith So Hard?</i>	17
<b>Part 1: Faith, Knowledge, and Doubt</b>	
1. Does It Really Matter What I Believe?	33
2. What Is the Relationship between Faith and Knowledge?	55
3. How Does Faith Grow?	71
<b>Part 2: Thinking about God</b>	
4. Can I Believe in Atheism?	97
5. Is “I Don’t Know” Enough to Know?	118
6. If There Is One God, Why Are There So Many Religions?	129
7. Do You Seriously Expect Me to Think of God As an Old Man with a Long White Beard?	144
8. Don’t All Paths Lead to the Same God?	164
<i>Conclusion: Next Steps</i>	182
<i>Sources and Resources</i>	185

# Does It Really Matter What I Believe?

This chapter attempts to define faith by distinguishing “good faith” from “bad faith.” These important terms will be used throughout the book. It also explores the problem of “circularity” (that arguments about faith often seem to be circular arguments) and the idea of a “leap of faith.”

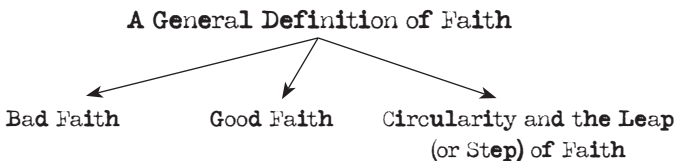
## Who Should Read This Chapter?

If you have heard or made the statement, “It doesn’t really matter what you believe, as long as you’re sincere,” this chapter is a must-read for you. This chapter is also for you if you are bothered by the fact that faith seems to make many adherents into worse people, not better people.

## What Questions Does It Address?

What is faith? What is bad faith? What is good faith? How can I “get into” faith if I feel like an outsider?

## Overview/Diagram



*The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the source of all true science. . . . To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists . . . this knowledge, this feeling, is the center of true religion.*

Albert Einstein

## Does It Really Matter What I Believe?

**I**t doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." That must be one of the most common statements I hear when people first start talking about faith. What do you think about that statement? Personally, I don't think these people really mean what they are saying, at least not literally.

- They couldn't mean that it's okay for a crazed cult leader to sincerely believe his sincere followers should join him in sincerely drinking poisoned Kool-Aid so they can end up in heaven together sooner rather than later.
- They couldn't mean it's okay for white supremacists or anti-Semites to believe and practice their beliefs, as long as they are sincere—which, I say with sadness and disgust, they often seem to be.
- They couldn't mean it's okay for totalitarian dictators to suppress religious freedom, since they are sincere in believing religion is an opiate of the masses or a menace to their regime.
- They couldn't mean that it would be okay for sincere religious fundamentalists to control the lives of millions through sincere intimidation, censorship, legislation, or threats of violence.

- They couldn't mean that it would be fine with them for parents who believe that life is meaningless to raise their children with a nihilistic philosophy of life, freely offering their children drugs, for example, or allowing them to experiment with vandalism and violence, not caring about their education or motivation, abandoning any pretense of teaching moral guidelines, since they sincerely believe that nothing really matters.

The kinds of people who I have heard talk this way about sincerity would never agree with these implications of their statement taken literally.

Nor would these people want to be associated with the abandonment of truth that their statement seems to imply. They would never mean to invite people to the disaster of sincerely believing dangerous illusions. An analogy to walking on ice can help here. If you are walking on a lake that's covered with one inch of ice, no matter how sincere you are in believing you can do it, you are in for a cold soaking at best. If someone encourages you to try, "as long as you're sincere," they are no friend!

(Conversely, if you are walking on a lake that's covered with twelve inches of solid ice, even if you are plagued by doubt at every step, you will still be upheld. Of course, if your doubts are so great that you never get out on the lake at all, you will never know either way.)

So, the issue is less the sincerity or intensity of your faith than it is the trustworthiness of the object of your faith: Is it solid enough, deep enough, trustworthy enough, to be capable of holding your weight? From this vantage point, the "as long