

ENDORSEMENTS

Joe Nesom has known what he believes and grown in what he believes for almost a score of years beyond half a century. He also has seen the fruit of an affectionate grasp of truth in his own life. He has taught these truths in their biblical context to his local church for decades and has seen that “the truth will set you free” in the lives of hundreds of those who have prospered spiritually under his ministry. This book arises from full confidence in the infallibility of Scripture and an experiential acquaintance with the power of the gospel. Its simple clarity should not mask its profundity. Read, grow, and prosper.

Thomas J. Nettles
Founding Faculty, Founders Seminary

A pastor must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) and “hold firm to the trustworthy as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:10). Joe Nesom is just such a pastor and this book is the fruit of the faithful discharge of his teaching for more than four decades, most of that time in service to the First Baptist Church of Jackson, LA. He has given us excellent instruction in key doctrines of the Word of God. I highly recommend this book to new believers as well as to those who want to better understand the Christian faith. The discussion questions at the end make this a helpful guide for private or group studies. I highly recommend it.

Thomas K. Ascol
President, Founders Ministries
Pastor, Grace Baptist Church
Cape Coral, FL

This delightful work by Joe Nesom provides clear and accessible theology from the heart of a pastor. One of the greatest needs in the church today is to be grounded in sound doctrine that informs all of life. In a highly readable style, Joe writes with clear-minded precision but also with a warm devotional spirit. I highly recommend this book for use in church discipleship classes and Bible studies to teach the average churchman basic theology for the glory of God.

Tom Hicks
Author, *What Is a Reformed Baptist?*
Pastor, First Baptist Church
Clinton, LA

For the second time, I gladly recommend *Be Sure What you Believe* by Joe Nesom. It is a succinct and readable volume for new believers, pastors, mature believers, and all others exploring the Christian faith. It has been used successfully for men's and women's bible studies, Sunday School courses, youth classes, etc. Its widespread use reveals that it is a clear and simple exposition of the major doctrines of the faith. Joe's 42 year ministry at First Baptist Church, Jackson, LA, is a testimony to his faithfulness and effectiveness in teaching these great truths contained in this volume. I highly recommend it!

Fred Malone
Author, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*
Pastor Emeritus, First Baptist Church
Clinton, LA

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WHAT YOU
BELIEVE**

**THE CHRISTIAN FAITH
SIMPLY EXPLAINED**

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JOE NESOM



BE SURE WHAT YOU BELIEVE

The Christian Faith Simply Explained

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For Emma, Maggie, Leila, Kell, Keira, and Worth

*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have
heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

*By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us,
guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Tim. 1:13–14)*

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. (Hos. 4:6)

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FOREWORD

Buried in my attic is a box of books labeled “Heretical Things I Used to Read,” or something like that. In the box are books by T. D. Jakes, John Eldredge, Rick Warren, and others that were prominently displayed on Christian bookstore shelves in the late 1990s.

Coming to faith as a teenager and without a strong local church, I was carried along by all the accoutrements of the twentieth-century parachurch. Christian radio, Christian bookstores, Christian concerts, and Christian T-shirts were all part of my early Christian experience. Yet, strange as it may sound, Christian doctrine was not an early part of my discipleship.

And so, when I went to college, I had an odd collection of books given to me by friends and family who tried to encourage my faith with many of the relics now collecting dust in my attic. At the same time, a few classics found their way into my hands. For instance, in the same semester that I read T. D. Jakes’s book on manhood, I also read William Gurnall and his classic text on spiritual warfare *The Christian in Complete Armor*. Yet, this excellent Puritan volume was quickly followed by Greg Boyd’s *God at War*, which was then followed by J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*.

It is safe to say that, as a young Christian, I had no idea what I was doing.

Long story short, if I have any measure of sound doctrine today, it is by the grace of God and a reeducation program that began in the middle of college. As I have told the story elsewhere, good friends confronted my theological errors, and a good God

prevented me from continuing down a path of spiritual folly.¹ In both cases, the Lord and His servants introduced me to new and better books to help me understand the Good Book.

When I came to faith, I had an appetite for spiritual things, but what I didn't have was a clear direction of what I should "eat." Like a newborn babe, I put everything in my mouth. By God's grace, He kept my spiritual interests alive as I kept reading the Bible and books about the Bible. This meager diet continued until, in God's providence, He led me to greener pastures without poisonous weeds. I will be eternally grateful for the path He led me on. Like Paul, who never forgot where he came from, I keep those books in the attic as a reminder of my story.

Still, it would have been much better to begin my Christian life with the book you hold in your hands. Or to go back in time, it would have been perfect timing to receive the 1999 version of this book when Joe Nesom first wrote it. Sadly, I had not found the Reformed Baptist faith at that time. But I'm heartened to know that after twenty-five years, Pastor Nesom has continued to preach the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and that this new and updated edition is going to be ready for others who are looking for sound doctrine.

Indeed, while many things go under the banner of "Christian" today, what believers, and those considering the claims of Christ, need most is a solid grasp of sound doctrine. In his pastoral epistles, Paul talks often about the importance of sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:9, 2:1; see also 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13, 4:3), for believers are only made "sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13; 2:2) by means of sound teaching (2 Tim.

¹ David Schrock, "God of the Impossible: A Personal Reflection on God's Providence Over My Open Theism," The Gospel Coalition, May 17, 2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/god-of-the-impossible/>.

1:13) that rightly handles “the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). As Paul says in Eph. 4:7–12, the exalted Christ has gifted His church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers who are sent to equip the saints for their work of service in the church.

In other words, there is no healthy church and there are no healthy Christians without healthy doctrine that comes from the faithful teaching of God’s Word. Indeed, the word translated “sound” in the pastoral epistles has the idea of “healthy.” And just as it is possible to be alive and very unhealthy due to poor eating habits, so it is possible for a child of God to be truly alive (read: born again), but woefully malnourished or even poisoned by the false teachers on television, YouTube, or Spotify. If one had to go to a local bookstore to find false teachers in the 1990s, it is now possible to find them with a few misguided clicks on Google. For this reason, good books by sound teachers are all the more important. And what you have in your hands is, in my estimation, an outstanding book for introducing healthy doctrine to a hungry child of God.

For those who are considering the Christian faith, or for those who have just identified themselves with Christ in baptism, this book is an ideal resource. At the same time, for longstanding ministers of the gospel and other faithful Christians seeking to pass along the faith to the next generation, *Be Sure What You Believe* introduces to believers some of the most important truths they will need to both know and love God.

With simplicity and skill, Pastor Nesom has woven together a book saturated with Scripture. While other introductions to the faith may rely on biblical confessions or get weighed down with theological debates, *Be Sure What You Believe* is more basic. In twenty accessible chapters, he introduces the Word of God,

theology proper: the doctrine of God, the person and work of Christ, the order of salvation, the church and its ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper, and what it means to live for Christ before He returns. And in each chapter, Nesom ties the Scriptures cited to questions of application. This is a unique and helpful feature for young students of the Word.

If you compare Pastor Nesom's outline to your favorite systematic theology or to the London Baptist Confession, you will find many parallels. And as he introduces these doctrines with numerous texts of Scripture, he lightly touches on church history, the Protestant Reformation, Baptist distinctives, and illustrations from the mission field. As anyone who has read theology knows, there are countless ways to make the glories of theology complex. Yet, new believers and those looking for a basic introduction to the faith do not need complexity. They need what is found in this book. As I read this book, I reflected on my own introduction to the faith and was struck by the way this book would have been the ideal resource to read when I started college.

Indeed, when I was searching in the wilderness of shallow songs and popular false teachers, what Pastor Nesom has written here would have been the solid food, bright light, and compass I needed to feed on the Lord and to walk by His truth. Today, I can't go back in time to put this book in my teenage hands, but I can encourage you to read it and share it with others who need a faithful introduction to the faith. Truly, what you have here is sound doctrine in its simplest form, and I trust it will bless all those who read it.

David Schrock
Pastor of Preaching and Theology
Occoquan Bible Church
Woodbridge, Virginia

INTRODUCTION

In the years just after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, Jude wrote a short epistle directed against false teachers. He had first intended to write a treatise on the biblical doctrine of salvation but felt the need of the hour compelled him to address the subject of the character and goals of those who were maliciously bringing harmful teachings and practices into the life of the church. He told first-century Christians they should “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Jude, as well as all of Christ’s apostles, taught that there is a body of truth given to God’s people in the Holy Scriptures. This body of truth, which is the whole counsel of God for His people, must be taught to every generation. It has not been so very long ago that thousands upon thousands of children growing up in Christian homes were catechized concerning the great doctrines of the Bible. Today, the great majority of children who grow up with Christian parents are largely ignorant of the faith.

We also live in a day when the very possibility of knowing absolute truth is questioned or denied. Many professing Christians sound more like Pilate than Christ. They ask, “What is truth?” (John 18:38) and do not remember that the Lord Jesus Christ had just told Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37).

Christians should have a desire to grow in understanding of what the Scriptures teach concerning God, man, sin, salvation,

and the relationship of the Lord Jesus Christ to all these areas of truth. They need to study the Bible in order to familiarize themselves with as much of its content as possible. But the goal of this study must not be the winning of arguments or the mere acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. They need to learn to see how the great doctrines of the faith emerge from the Bible and how they are intended to shape the lives we live. Christ taught us the importance of loving God with our minds (Luke 10:27). Christians must become thinkers. We must be willing to question the traditions of men and evaluate all teaching and practice in the light of God's Word.

The Lord has not left us alone in this task. If we are truly Christ's servants, we have the Holy Spirit living within us to illumine and guide. And the Lord has graciously given to His people men who have the gift of teaching. It is their responsibility to proclaim the truth of God from age to age.

May we give ourselves wholeheartedly to the task of study, and let us pray that, when we hear the Word of God taught, it may take root in our hearts. By these means, we will come to reflect the glory that has been revealed in our Savior, Jesus Christ. Then we will not fail to learn how to think His thoughts and put them into practice.

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S WORD

What is the source of our knowledge of God? For that matter, is there an authority we can consult that is sufficient to guide us in all matters that concern this life and the next? Indeed, there is. The Holy Scriptures provide that guidance for us.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

It is true that there is a revelation of God in nature. God's creative work and His providential guidance of all things give a very clear testimony concerning His existence, His wisdom, and His power. This revelation is sufficient to condemn men for their stubborn refusal to acknowledge their need for God. But nature is not sufficient to save us or to give us the knowledge we need to please God in the way we conduct our lives. The testimony of creation can be very impressive. What immense orbits some heavenly visitors have! Comets appear in our skies that last appeared there before the birth of the Savior two thousand years ago. How large the purposes of God are! As Paul the Apostle taught the church at Rome, such things speak of God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20). The apostle goes on to say mankind is without an excuse for not acknowledging the

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existence of God and the sovereign right that God has to rule His creatures. Such revelations of God, as exist in nature and providence, are merciful in character.

It is in written revelation that the Lord has given us a divinely inspired testimony concerning His way of revealing Himself in times past, and particularly the revelation of Himself in Christ. We call this written revelation of God's will the Bible, or the Holy Scriptures. This collection of divinely inspired books consists of both the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the New Testament. The New Testament is the testimony of certain divinely ordained men who were used by God to give us an authoritative word about our Lord Jesus Christ and the meaning of His death and resurrection from the dead. It is in the Bible that we discover the truth that we need to know, concerning our sins and our present standing before God. It is in the Bible that we discover what God has done for the salvation of undeserving sinners. The apostle Peter gave testimony concerning the authenticity of the Old Testament when he said "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Notice that Peter identified the Holy Spirit as the true author of Scripture. God was pleased to use human minds and pens to give us the Word of God. But it is truly God's Word. Paul put it this way: "We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13).

THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

The books of what we call the Old Testament were accepted as Scripture by our Lord Jesus Christ. Unlike the Sadducees of His day, who denied the inspiration and authority of much of

the Bible, our Lord clearly accepted these books as given to us by God.

After the last of the Old Testament books were written—about 400 years before Christ—Hebrew historians and poets continued to make their contributions to the literature of their day. Many years later, in the Christian era, these books—which have come to be called the Apocrypha—came to be published as a part of some translations of the Bible. These works are valuable for our understanding of the times but should not be taken for God's own Word. They should not be regarded as authoritative but should be used as we would any other work of ancient literature.

The New Testament is the collected writings of the men God used to give us a lasting testimony as to the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to explain to us the meaning of His death on the cross and of His resurrection from the dead. These books also teach us how the Lord fulfilled all the truths concerning the Messiah's ministry on behalf of sinners. These things had been revealed to God's prophets in Old Testament times.

Taken together, these two great testaments form the Bible, which is God's Word to man. It is the written revelation of everything we need to know in order to find salvation and live in the way that is pleasing to our God.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

How do we come to know the Scriptures are authoritative truth given to us by God? First, we need to know that the Bible is not dependent on the testimony of any human being, of any church, or of any scholars. The Word of God is its own testimony. It is self-authenticating. It is the *living* Word of God that the Lord takes and touches our hearts with when we hear

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it proclaimed, when we read it, or when it is read to us. The apostle John put it this way:

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. (1 John 5:9–10)

When the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, he reminded them that they had not treated the word from the Lord as just another theory or opinion of man.

We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 Thess. 2:13)

When you and I read a play by a great writer, we may say it is truly an inspired work, but when we talk about the inspiration of the Bible, we are discussing something that is wholly different. We believe as Christians that the Bible is the work of God's own Spirit. The Lord used various men to pen the words of Scripture. When we read an epistle of Peter, we can even see Peter's personality expressing itself. The same is true of all the human authors of the Bible. But we also believe, as they did, that the unseen author of all the Scriptures is God. And we believe and teach that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the Bible comes to our hearts today to be the "witness" we need to convince us of the truthfulness of the Word of God. John spoke about this work of the Spirit in this way: "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge" (1 John 2:20).

John could speak in this way because he remembered what the Lord Jesus Christ had taught him while here on the earth: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

The Bible is God’s Word and is wholly true. It must become the only authority for the Christian’s life. It must be our standard, as it alone has the right to judge all the doctrines and opinions of men. When the Lord Jesus Christ was tempted by Satan to use His divine power to make bread from stones, the Lord replied,

“It is written,

‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of
God.’” (Matt. 4:4)

UNDERSTANDING GOD’S WORD

Near the end of the last book of the Bible is a stern word of warning directed toward those who might think they have the right to add to God’s Word or to take away from it (Rev. 22:18–19). Lost man does not enjoy the “hard” teachings of God’s Word (John 6:60). The perfect righteousness, which is described for us in the Scriptures, forces us to confront our own sin. The desire to abridge or change the Word of God is a great temptation for those who feel its condemnation.

We have the Spirit of God if we are Christ’s. God’s own Spirit indwells His people. But this does not mean we can claim the same ability the prophets and apostles were given when the Lord used them to write His Word. We do not have inspiration. But we do have illumination. No person will be able to really understand and accept the teachings of the Bible unless the Holy Spirit enables that person to do so (1 Cor. 2:14).

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This is especially true of unbelievers. They need a special work of the Spirit to understand what the Bible teaches concerning their alienation from God and the dangers that await them if they do not repent. Those of us who have come to know the Lord still need the illuminating work of God to understand and apply the Scriptures. Then we will be able to use the direct commands of the Lord found in His Word to live our lives for His glory, and we will be able to take the general principles of righteousness found in the Bible and apply them to our lives. We will need to use the intelligence the Lord has given us as we trust the Holy Spirit to do His illuminating work.

It is not that the Lord causes us to enter a trance or to have things revealed in visions as some did in ancient times. Those things were for that age. But we have a full revelation of God's character and will because of what the Lord Jesus Christ did while here on earth.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1–2)

This revelation in Christ is all we need. Our task is to study it, understand it, and obey it.

We need not think of the Bible as too hard to understand. It is true that some passages are by their very nature difficult. This should not surprise us when we consider it is God, in all of His infinite being, that is the subject matter of the Scriptures. Speaking of the epistles of Paul, the apostle Peter wrote, "There are some things in [his letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16).

It is God's purpose in Scripture to communicate what we need to know in order to be reconciled to God. Godly men in past generations called this the "perspicuity" of the Bible. These great truths that concern us and our salvation are not difficult to understand. The teaching of Scripture is clear on these things. We might spend a lifetime studying the Word of God, but we will never exhaust its truth or fully master it. But a child, using the intelligence God has given him, and with the illuminating work of the Spirit, can come to know God.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
 reviving the soul;
 the testimony of the Lord is sure,
 making wise the simple. (Ps. 19:7)

The books of the Bible were written in Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of the Old Testament, and Greek, the language of the New Testament. If we are unable to read those languages, then we obviously need the help of translators. Some translations are believed to be better than others. Some do a good job of word-for-word translation but fail to produce a translation that is true to the language we speak. Others strive for an *understandable* result but fail to render the Hebrew or Greek as accurately. Some of the most successful English translations have been the King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the American Standard Version (ASV), the New International Version (NIV), and the English Standard Version (ESV). It is often helpful to purchase several good translations of the Bible in one's own language and study them all to get a better understanding of the original text.

We must also realize that the Lord Jesus Christ came to bring the full revelation of God to us. Thus, in order to understand the Old Testament, we must read it in light of its fulfillment in the New Testament. The new will determine

the true meaning of the old. The Old Testament is filled with shadows and types, e.g., pictorial representations, of our Lord. The New Testament pulls back the curtain and reveals Christ clearly. Then the whole of Scripture becomes a revelation of our God and of what He has done for sinners in Christ. But do not misunderstand—the Old Testament is Scripture in the same sense that the New Testament is. Both were directly inspired by God.

OUR FINAL AUTHORITY

Whatever controversy may arise as to what the truth is, or as to what constitutes true practice for Christians, must be settled by an appeal to the teaching of the Bible. Tradition will not do. The edicts of church councils may be helpful but are not the final authority. When the apostles tried to convince the people of their day about the truth of salvation through Christ, they did not appeal to such pronouncements. They appealed to the Word of God. When the apostle Paul reached the city of Rome as a prisoner, many people came to hear him. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us “From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (Acts 28:23).

The Word of God must be the final judge of all things. Devotional books are flawed. Sunday school publications are not without errors. Works of theology err. Mission publications often unintentionally spread misinformation. Much of what is sold in “Christian” bookstores is either not very helpful or so full of bad doctrine as to be virtually useless. But the Bible never fails! Go to God’s Word. Read it. Study it. Learn from it before you begin to use the many helpful books designed to enhance the study of the Scriptures.

There is also another reason for going to the source document, the Bible. C. S. Lewis observed that reading and understanding Plato is much easier than trying to wade through the many works that have been written about Plato. The same thing is true of the Bible. The Lord has given us pastors and teachers to teach the content of the Scriptures to His church. Good books that help us apply the Bible to our lives can be helpful, but that does not mean a Christian has no need to read their primary textbook, the Bible. Every assertion made in a sermon or in a book should be judged by what the Bible actually says.

Get into the Book of Books itself! A true Christian comes to love the Word of God.

Your testimonies are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
because I long for your commandments.
(Ps. 119:129–131)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do all people learn about God from the created order? (Rom. 1:18–20)
2. What has God revealed in His Word that cannot be discovered elsewhere? (1 Cor. 2)
3. Who is the True Author of the Bible? (2 Peter 1:21; 2 Tim. 3:16)
4. Is it right for us to choose which parts of the Bible we will believe and obey? (Matt. 4:4)
5. What special illumination does one need to understand God's Word? (1 Cor. 2:14)
6. What is the believer's attitude toward the Scriptures? (Ps. 119:129–131)