

Wagering on a Different Posture: Exploring Main Floor Christianity — Dr. Joshua Chatraw

The steps started coming down with me. I was almost not here for the third one. Well, thanks for showing up again for this final talk. Let's see if I can get... Are we ready? Okay, in this final talk, I want us to jump into what I've been promising, which is exploring the main floor of Christianity. Just by way of review, I know you just heard this, but I want to hit the big point, just so you make sure you see the connections. We've seen how the attic is built in reaction to cultural changes. It's not. And one of the things I was talking to one of you during the break is, one of the things we What we're trying to do in the book is there's a healthy way to interpret your past. It's not to demonize everyone who made a wrong move. It's not to say, Oh, well, the reason I deconstructed is because I'm a victim and everyone else have done these horrible things. No, no, no.

There's a way, in *Surprised by Doubt*, in particular, where we're trying to really help people in a mature way process their past. Of course, what I'm arguing is the problem is the attic can deform our posture such that walking in faith through doubt is much harder, actually, as we deal with these challenges that we have in our modern pluralistic society. Sometimes in the way we've tried to help in a defensive posture has actually backfired. Then I argued, We all must live somewhere. We should be just as critical with the spaces outside the house as we are with whatever room we grew up in. I think that's something you can ask someone is, are you willing to be just as critical with where you might be about to step into? In some ways, just to draw on this from this wonderful classic book, Dostoevsky's *Brothers, the Karamazov*. I see in this book, if you haven't read it, it's really one of the classics that I would suggest you making some time for one summer or as you have time. But in this account, which is Dostoevsky, who's a Christian, is very much bringing to the fore some of the deepest, I think, challenges to Christianity.

And they're really their voice through the skeptical figure, Ivan, throughout the novel. But one of the heroes of the novel is one of the other brothers, Alyosha. One of the things that about the interaction with Ivan, the skeptic in Alyosha, is, well, Ivan is saying he rejects God because of the suffering in the world. In fact, he says, even if God exists, a God who would permit this type of suffering, I'm going to hand back the ticket. I give him back. I reject him. And Alyosha doesn't really know how to respond all the time to Ivan. And he can't keep pace with him intellectually. And the reason I'm bringing this up here is because I think sometimes in conversations, you might feel like this. I can't keep pace with this person intellectually. And one of the things that Alyosha does is he asks good questions. I think this is the start if you find yourself in a situation where you're saying, this person is bringing to me things and I'm not sure what to say. Rather than try to take them always head on, is come through the side and learn to ask good questions.

And this is what Alyosha does as Ivan's waxing eloquently about meaningless and his rejection of God. And he asked this question, But the little sticky leaves and the precious tombs, tombs of those who had going before him may have cared for them that they had loved. The blue sky and the woman you love, how will you live? How will you love them? The question would haunt Ivan through the novel, How will you live? Where are the words of life to be found? Where will you live? I think those are good questions. It doesn't mean in every conversation, it's going to be neatly resolved. But planting these questions in their mind and coming back to them and having discussions about these realities of life, the things we all must deal with, we will suffer, we will die.

The main floor of Christianity is here is where we say, Hey, now that you've looked outside the house, would you be willing to come and look again with a different posture. Will you come down and can I articulate for you what I mean by main floor Christianity? Coming downstairs is one of the things we can ask people do is to re-imagine Christianity, not simply as an abstract system or a set of propositions, but a way to adjust our posture. I think one way to do this, or another metaphor imagery I want to use, is to imagine yourself in a tool shed. Now, there's a figure here, again, who I'm ripping off of. But If you imagine yourself in a tool shed or just a shed at all, you can imagine yourself walking in and seeing a beam of light come through. Maybe you've done this in a dark room, and there's a couple of ways to approach that beam of light. You can look through the corner, there's this light coming through, and you look at that light and you can see the particles. You know how you can see dust particles in light? And you're looking at it, and you can't see anything because it's dark in the room, but this beam of light with the dust particles in it. But then if you adjust yourself, so you can look at it, but if you adjust yourself, you actually can look along that beam and you can see out through the crack. This is what C. S. Lewis, this is actually, again, C. S. Lewis's imagery that he talks about. There's the crack or the beam of light.

He says, "I was standing today in the dark tool shed. The sun was shining outside, and through the crack at the top of the door, there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light with the specs of dust floating in it was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing by it. Then I moved. He adjusts his posture. Then I moved so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly, the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no tool shed, and above all, no beam. Instead, I saw framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away the sun. Looking along the beam and looking at the beam are very different experiences." To look at Christianity is to look at the core truth of the faith and to examine it. I think this is important. I mean, one of the things that this involves is

looking at the historical claim being made by Jesus, by looking at the person of Jesus, that who he was, what he did.

So this is what I would say. I wanted us to think about using this as a way to present Christianity, the main floor. And on one hand, it's not to say that we shouldn't look at Christianity. We should look at it, but we also need to look by it or through it to see how it illumines the world. Then the last point I want to make in this talk is that we need to learn to step out and step into that light. So to look, to actually step into the light and live. I'm extending Louis' metaphor.

But I want to start with what does it mean to look at? To look at is one way to look at is to come back to this historical claim of resurrection. At some point in these types of conversations, what I would say to someone is, if you can believe in the resurrection, you should stay in the house. You can still doubt lots of things and wrestle with a lot of things, but if you can believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead, then you should stay in the house. It doesn't mean that those other objections won't sometimes bother you or sometimes will really bother you, but it means that you can have doubt and still hang on, stay with it.

Yes, so this means on the intellectual front, doing some reading. It might mean you walking alongside somebody and saying, Hey, will you read this book on the resurrection with me? Now, there's lots of really great material these days on this. The recent classic book on this is N. T. Wright's book, *On the Resurrection*. It's very dense. Let me give you some shorter things that most people today might be willing to get into. Still, I think Tim Keller's chapter in *The Reason for God* on the resurrection is very readable. It's really taking a lot of the arguments that NT Wright made in his more academic book. Then also, just because I'll mention it in part just because you have it, because you came, so I'm not trying to sell you the book, but we have a chapter on the resurrection and *Surprised by Doubt*, and you might walk with somebody through that. Talk about the evidence, weigh it together. But also, and I think this is important, have rational expectations. There are, I believe, strong evidential reasons for the resurrection, to believe in the resurrection. But always, as you should know by now, from everything I've said, there's always more going on than simply evidence and data-crunching.

Historal arguments are never going to rise to the level of 100% certainty. That's not how history works. It's not how history works. The question isn't, can the resurrection be proven? The question is, what makes best sense? Is it rational to wager on the resurrection? In some sense, we get up every day and we make a wager. We make a wager on Jesus. We make a wager on the resurrection. I think that there's some really good historical reasons to make that wager, even if it doesn't rise to the level of 100% certainty. But again, the even notion that history would work like that is a misaligned posture that you might have to deal with.

Next, when looking at Christianity, though, we don't just need to say, Hey, look at the historical evidence. I would suggest to you look at the person of Jesus. Remember I said that part of the main floor of Christianity is about focus on the person of Jesus, to come back to Christ. Again, admittedly, our thoughts about Jesus are often colored by the people who introduced us to him. If someone has grown cynical through the years because of the failings of their religious community, it can be easy for them to see Jesus through that lens. But what I would ask them to do is to not let the disillusionment with the attic, you've addressed that already, the disillusionment with the attic, don't let that give you a jaundice view of Jesus.

So again, I would ask somebody, would you read the Gospels with me? Would you read the Gospels in community? Let's take another look at Jesus. Would you be willing to do that? The goal is to recalibrate faith, not in abstract ideas about Jesus, but around the very person of Jesus. Of course, we believe that the word of God is living and active. So this calling and asking, Hey, I know you've got all these things, but can we look at Jesus together? It doesn't mean you won't have all these other doubts, but let's come back and let's recenter and recalibrate around the person of Christ. In Jesus, I would argue we find what love and true greatness looks like. In Jesus, we see the one who prayed for those who crucified. Even at the end of his life, Jesus was turning the tables, the just dying for the unjust, the guiltless taking on our guilt, evil defeated by good, the King laying down his life for his people.

Just think about the claims of Jesus. I think sometimes somebody who's very familiar with these stories, forget about the radical claims of Christ. As much as I love my wife and my friends, I could never, ever think of any of my loved ones as being in some sense, God. Now, that's a weird hint. That's a weird transition, isn't it? But here's my point. I know them too much. Their sins, their shortcomings. But think about in Jesus' case. Here's a guy who traveled with these disciples for three years. If you went camping with me, if we did take that camping trip and we went out for three days, you'd probably be ready to kill me after three days. Just talk to Hudson. There's no sense at the end of that, you're thinking, Oh, I need to worship Josh as God. That's just not in the realm of plausibilities. You'll know me too well. You'll see my faults. There's many. But in Jesus' case, quite shockingly, not only did he make the claim to somehow be God, to claim the very identity of Yahweh, to these conservative Jews. It's like they had the same VBS Bible verse every year, Deuteronomy 6:4. Same time. What are we doing this year? Deuteronomy 6:4 again? Yes. You only worship one God. We got that. We got that one down. Can we move on? No, we're having it again. That's what they knew. Then you have these conservative first century these monotheists, these Jews, and very quickly, we know this historically, very quickly, they're worshipping Jesus. And these are the people who were around them, the leaders of these churches, who are the disciples.

Now, how do you get there? How do you get there from these... How do you get to that paradigm shift of saying, Okay, you only to God to now we're worshiping Jesus. Well, I think we know, actually. Yeah, there's an argument there for the resurrection, but there's more than that, right? Because one thing, if Jesus rose from the dead, oh, that was pretty awesome. That guy rose from the dead. But that doesn't necessarily lead to worshiping him. So yeah, that's part of it. But there also had to be some claims made and also Here are people who had a front and center. They saw his life. Of course, we see that, too, because we have the Gospels.

Part of this is taking people to the Gospels to see the beauty and the awesomeness of the person of Jesus. This confidence in the word of God, this confidence in the Gospels that the Spirit uses, in this life, the life of Christ, as we're pointing them, as we're reading the Gospels with people. This is what he's been doing, the Spirit's been doing for 2000 years, inviting people through the Gospels to worship the living God. So both of that is a looking at. It's looking at historically, it's also looking at the Gospels, taking our focus not on all these other things going on, but can I help recalibrate this person's faith? Can I apply the medicine of the gospel, which is the person of Christ, which is the goodness of the gospel? So it's looking at. But it also means at this point, I think I want to reference something I said earlier, looking at the light of Christianity, that also helps us, what I called earlier, load-bearing walls, helps us do this. It's a way of seeing these early creeds and these early confessions as a way, not to say everything, but to say, hey, these are really central and important things. And what is that? It's things like the doctrine of God, the person of Jesus Christ, It helps us say, okay, actually, we need to look at Christ. We need to look at God. We need to look at who God is in light of Jesus Christ. This allows both a posture that refocuses and still allows for mystery. We don't know everything, but let's look again at Jesus.

But all this raises, again, so one of the differences here is by recalibrating around early creeds. It's not a way to say, Hey, the Bible isn't sufficient. It is. But the creeds help us keep our eyes on the most important things. Rather than, this inevitably happens in our churches, where we say, Yeah, the gospel part, the Jesus part, but we're really getting psyched up about this issue. We have our natural, even I do, of course, hobby horses that we like to talk about. What the collective wisdom of the past does, it gives us this structural blueprint of the house, so to speak, and it marks out these load-bearing walls. Many in the midst of deconstruction have paid the price of inheriting a faith that's disconnected from this collective wisdom.

And so the history of the church, the communal witness of the church, helps us. So it's not just the senior pastor or parents or what these parochial sometimes concerns are, but this is throughout history, what the church has always said is central, and let's make sure we keep that

in front of people. But the creeds also help us get the gospel right, not simply so we can keep looking at the right thing, but also we can keep on looking through the gospel to see the world.

And this brings me to Lewis' second point. It's not only a looking at, but it's a looking through. It's looking through or along the beam. To do this, I actually want to pick up another. If you think about my imagery, I think in my previous lecture, I said, or sometime today. They're all running together for me, probably for you as well. But I talked about meeting strange characters. In some sense, we've already met Augustine, we've already met Lewis. Here's my third figure that we meet down in the main floor. It's the 17th century philosopher and scientist, Blaise Pascal. Because what Blaise Pascal has helped me to do and helped others do as well is to learn to what I call wager wisely. And it gets at this idea of looking through in this way. Pascal believe that questions about God and questions and basic scientific questions should be answered very differently. He was a scientist. For Pascal, the heart is essential to the human quest to discover meaning and purpose. Pascal called this the logic of the heart. This is a logic deeply ingrained in us and includes instinctive first principles like the belief in the reliability of space and motion and numbers, but also deeply existential things like love and morality. These first principles of the heart cannot be proven in the way, again, that one might try to prove a science experiment or a math problem, but they're nonetheless deep realities that we assume and we reason from. Pascal was not saying that the logic of the heart is irrational. Pascal was happy to give reasons one should believe that Christianity is true. However, he believed that the logic of the heart operated in dimensions that narrow accounts of reason could never reach. Pascal offers us a more expansive account of rationality. When I was talking earlier about let's be rational about rationality, that's a Pascalian move there. Because Pascal understood the limits of the reasoning that was gaining influence in his day.

Here's the upshot of why I'm bringing Pascal in at this point. Stop and consider, or maybe these are types of questions you would want to ask someone. Stop and consider whether a narrow view of rationality or more expansive view is more reasonable to wager on. Can you prove that humans should love one another? The moral responsibility to love other humans and treat them with dignity, many would say, is self-evident. Many today would claim that self-evident, but it can't be proven. Can we prove that humans possess rights or should be treated with universal dignity? That women should have the same rights as men, that no person should own another human being. We can't prove these things, but that does not mean they're not true. In the hope of answering questions about God and eternity, should we attempt to escape our drive for the good and the beautiful and whittle down our rationality to a narrow, brittle logic? Pascal would say that is a bad bet. You can bet on that, but it's a bad bet. And you're probably going to smuggle in faith because you still have to live. You're going to believe in something for meaning. You're going to end up loving. If an individual or society attempts to live with this type of narrow

rationality consistently, the result will be a growing cynicism towards the very things that make us human. The best way to wager on the big questions is to take all aspects of human nature into account. Put them on the table. Not to leave anything off, put it all on the table. Everything we know about humans in our world should be left there, especially Especially the features of personhood that seem universal.

We have a deep desire as humans to believe what is actually true, not simply what we want to be true. We humans can't escape that our visions of love, beauty, meaning, hope, justice, goodness, are tied to how we reason. We reason towards a certain aim, toward what philosophers call a telos. Each of these features, meaning hope, justice, goodness, beauty, these features of our person is connected to a deeper experience, a deeper longing that we have as humans of true joy. By the way, this is what C. S. Lewis famously wrote about, *Surprise by Joy*. We are, again, ripping off of Lewis.

You're meant to see the connection if you haven't already. They are essential parts of the good life. By observing our human nature and a realistic view of rationality, we see that trying to answer and fulfill life's biggest questions, the big ones, the most important ones, and including the ones about God, requires that we give credence to our deepest longings, not pull them aside and push them away. Anything less would be a bad bet.

Here's what I want you to see and be able to help others see. Christianity provides a window to make sense of these deep intuitions. The secular frame of our world today certainly has its own explanations. Yet purely secular theories obscure the light that humans have embraced, causing, as one philosopher says, a certain unease. There's a certain unease in a culture today, an angst, an anxiety. Or as he puts it later, there's a lack of fullness. There's what Augustine would say, there's a restlessness. Secular accounts have tended either to shrink back from the logical outworkings of their position or to move forward to reduce these sources of meaning to mere accidents or temporary illusions. Again, let me read a fairly long quote, but one worth it.

This is a famous quote from Bertrand Russell. He says this, and what I appreciate is the unflinching clarity here. He says, "That man is the product of causes which had no provision of the they were achieving, that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental colocations of atoms, that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave, that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects

them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths. Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

Now, if Russell is right and this universe is vast, cold, and pointless, then we are left with, I pretty much think, two options. We can either accept despair or we can cobble together meaning for ourselves. We can try to string up our own webs of meaning. But if you wager on making webs of meaning for yourself. Yeah, I'm going to live. I'm going to everyone lives with some meaning, some aims, and I'm just going to make them for myself. Then the question for you or for your friend here is how meaningful is made up meaning? What do we make of our individual meanings in the face of our own deaths and the inevitable death of the universe? And then I'd add, even if you attempt to dismiss the rays of light and follow Russell's logic of despair, you probably won't be able to shield yourself from the light entirely. Light has this way of shining through. We intuitively live life like our lives really matter. We're existential sharks, as one philosopher puts it. We're on this search for beauty. We all won't love. We all want to be loved. And ever since the light of Jesus' moral revolution penetrated into the deepest parts of Western culture, it has seemed unnatural and difficult to revert back to a previous time and deny the aspirations that have led to the ideals of human rights and universal benevolence.

If you want more on this, we were just talking about at the table, the non-Spiderman Tom Holland, the historian in his book *Dominion*, is mapping this all out. In other words, what happens when the gospel gets into the bloodstream of a culture, he's arguing, is that even as the culture gets away from the gospel, it can't help but feel, to use another metaphor of another theologian, the crater marks of the gospel. You deny the gospel, but this whole thing about we should love our neighbor as ourself. The logic of it, the story that it's embedded in, that it was received in is no longer there, but the moral aspiration is there. One of the things to say is, hey, we actually agree on universal benevolence. We should love people simply because they're humans. We should respect people because they're humans. But the Why should we? We don't get from man evolved from apes, therefore we should love one another. It doesn't follow. On a purely secular account, if that's all you have, if all you have is an evolutionary account, if that's all you have, and yet you're affirming something here that we both affirm, you're coming back and saying, What? You actually don't have a rational warrant for that. See, we desire justice, and we sense that each person's life is sacred. What we have, though, is grounded in a historical claim and centered on a person the Christian story affirms, explains, and provides motivation to act out on these deepest of human ideals. If we're all living out a story, I don't know any other story that does all that. As far as I can tell, it's the only ball game. A story that historically makes a claim that affirms the deepest of human morality and also gives resources, as we saw in our second talk, to actually live this out, to serve, to for the world and enjoy the world as a gift. I don't know any other story that does that.

Finally, a wayer wisely, a window to see as we look through. Finally, the last point in this talk is that it's also we have to call people to step into the light. We need to challenge others, as the theologian Sarah Coakley puts it to put their lives on the line through certain practices. This means we must be willing to step into the light and step and call other people. This is a come, taste, and see in this final step. Doctrines are absolutely necessary. I don't think I need to say that in a group like this. But they're necessary as guides toward our true destination. Doctrines should never be the goal of the Christian life. We can't simply reduce Christian living to ideas. Christianity offers ways for each person to commune with God and flourish in a broken world. We're given the spirit of God, to know God, for God to dwell in us, to walk with him. We need to think about this problem of doubt. Yes, this is what we've been doing today. We need to think about it. But that can't be all we do. Our thinking should prompt us to pay better attention. We pay better attention to ourselves and our own soul and the world and to the people in front of us, to the souls that we're called to bring healing and hope to by adopting different practices so that we inhabit this world differently.

My question, well, to you today, but also the question at this point in a conversation, well, it might actually be the same. What if God is present, but we've inherited ways of seeing that blinds us to his activity? What if we are under a spell, conditioned by the hustle and bustle of our modern lives and thus don't see God at work all around us? Stepping into the light means adopting certain practices. Richard Beck, a Christian psychologist who's written on these things, says, unbelief isn't as much about, I'm paraphrasing, but he says it's not as much about arguments and it's about getting the right arguments, but it's about attending to the world differently. We don't sense God's presence because of the way we've inherited to see the world and attend to the world. Now, in a crowd like this, I probably don't need to, and also at the end of the day, I'm not going to march through all of these practices. Different traditions call them different things, of course, the means of grace, the disciplines of grace. But there's also even some mundane things we could add in here. On one hand, they all relate to slowing down, to praying, praying the Psalms. One of the things is people are doubting, or even just in different periods in my life where I've struggled with doubt and struggled to pray, I've learned to pray the Psalms. I've learned to pray through the prayers of those who've gone before me. I've had to learn to lament, slow down and lament, to wrestle with God. Spending time in nature, it was Lewis in one of his works, that he's calling people in the midst of their own doubts just to slow down and go out in nature and see God's creation. As the kids say, go touch some grass. Sometimes that's the wisest thing to do. Go for a walk. A pastor friend of mine would say, I often, especially with men, when we need to talk about spiritual things, we go for a walk. Practices that help us focus on God and the deep joys of creation, which our consumerism and our drive for efficiency so often rob us of. I could spend a lot of time talking about our phones

and Internet. I'll leave that to Dr. Plummer. We're in agreement on that, so I'll just leave that. He knows more about it than I do.

I have languished through seasons, as I said, we're praying, at times even felt impossible. And what I found is the right type of community and sources from the past broke through and the Lord used. I've also needed not only prayers from the past, but prayers from the present. And I want to read one in closing, and then we'll... I think I'm probably Probably a little early, but I'll leave in closing before we go to Q&A. This is from... A lot of you are familiar with this, Douglas McKelvey. He's got now three volumes of prayers entitled *Every Moment Holy*, and this is one of his prayers on doubt.

"There are other moments as now when I cannot sense you near, cannot hear you, see you, touch you. Times when fear or depression or frustration overwhelm. And I find no help or consolation when the sea walls of my faith crumble and give way to intruding tides of doubt. Even as the patriarch Job made of his pain and confusion a petition, even as the Psalmist gave, again and again, carried their cries, their questions, their laments to you. So would I be driven by my doubts to despair of my own strength and knowledge and righteousness and control, and instead to seek your face, knowing that when I plead for proof, what I most need is your presence. Oh Lord, how many times have you graciously led me through doubt into deeper faith. Do so again, my Lord and my God, even now, do so again. You alone are strong enough to carry the weight of my trouble thoughts, even as you alone are strong enough to bear the burden of my sin and my guilt and my shame, my wounds and my brokenness. Oh, Christ, let my doubts never compel me to hide my heart from you. Let them rather arise as questions to begin holy conversations. Invert these doubts, turning them to invitations to be present, to be honest, to see you, to cry out to you, to bring my heart fully into the struggle rather than seek to numb it. Let my doubts become invitations to wrestle with you through such dark nights of the soul as Jacob wrestled with the angel until the day breaks anew, and I am fresh, wounded by your love and resting in the blessing of peace again in your presence."

What this is? Doubt should not be celebrated. This is not a celebration of doubt today. But what if God is big enough? What if this God, this mysterious God that we worship, is big enough to even use doubt for good? To even use your doubt to glorify himself? What if he's even using your doubt to make your faith stronger? Using your doubt so that you're a better doctor, a better physician of the soul. I believe we worship such a God. Let's pray.

Lord, we've prayed at the beginning to help our unbelief to help us help those who are struggling with unbelief, who are deconstructing and doubting. Lord, we know that this means that we're not only faithful physicians of the soul, but this also means that we keep coming to you, our

great physician, and we know of your goodness and we know of your grace. So Lord, may we be not simply people with the right arguments, but the right type of people. Make us whole. Equip us for your service. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.