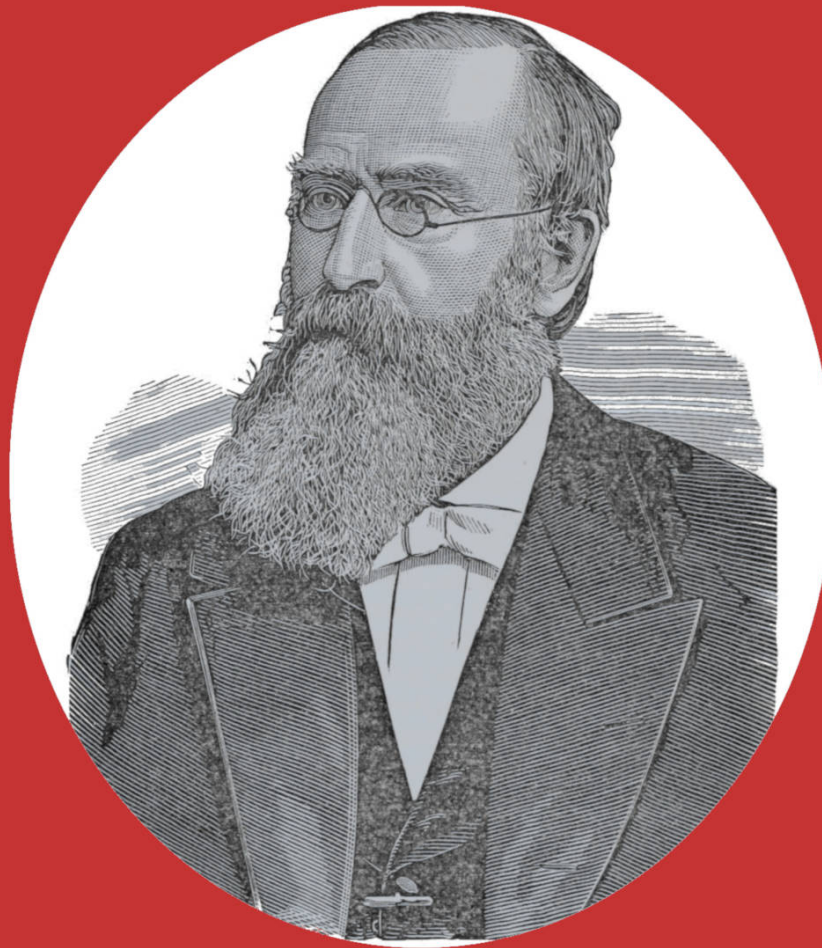


Charles Krauth

Letter to a Skeptic



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Letter To A Skeptic

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Letter To A Skeptic

By Charles Porterfield Krauth
Originally Published in *Evangelical Review* Vol. 5.

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Letter To A Skeptic

By Charles Krauth

The following letter, as it purports, was drawn up to meet the difficulty then stated by an infidel acquaintance. While it is to be presumed that there are few readers of the *Evangelical Review* who need conviction upon the point discussed, yet the discussion itself may not be unprofitable, may suggest answers to infidel objections, and assumptions, unfortunately too common among the young men of the present generation. To preserve the interest as well as the original freshness of the discussion, the epistolary form is retained.

MY DEAR FRIEND:— AS we may not see each other again, before the subject of our conversation shall have escaped from our memories, I will more fully draw out the answer to your question, which, as given at the time, and under the circumstances, was necessarily brief and imperfect.

That the answer should be much longer than the question, need occasion no surprise. It is easy to start a difficulty in three words, which it will take twice that number of pages to answer. And yet such difficulty may be altogether an imaginary one. Most of the objections against Christianity, assume for their basis some fact, which turns out, in the end, to be not a fact. And it is quite as common, upon this false fact, to erect an imaginary edifice, in the shape of illogical inferences. That the difficulty or objection which you suggest, is so stated as to involve both of these logical delinquencies, will, I trust, be seen before this answer shall have been brought to a close.

The Question of Faith

Your question may be thus stated: “if Christian faith always have a rational basis, how can we say that a child has faith, or a young person, who has made no special examination of the Christian evidences, when, at the same time, we say that such men as Hume, and Carlyle, and Gibbon have it not?”

Here, before answering more fully, I may point out the true assumptions mentioned above. The first is, that all are *equally willing to believe*, are equally *fair and honest* in their examination of such evidences of Christianity as comes before them, which is not the fact. Again, your objection assumes that men of great power, and of great investigation in some spheres of knowledge, are equally so in all others; in other words, that men, who have been great historians, or philosophers, have necessarily made a thorough examination of Christian evidences, which is also notoriously not the fact. Again, you assume that there are no other external evidences than those which are to be found in books, for the truth of Christianity, and that all evidence for Christianity is of this external character, both of which are equally unfounded. And again, you quietly assume, or rather insinuate, that Christian believers are, in the general, of the intellectual caliber of children and uninstructed young persons, while unbelievers are all of the stature of Hume, and Gibbon, and Carlyle, another assumption, without a grain of truth in its favor.

Leaving out of sight, for the present, however, all of these assumptions and blunders, suppose we take up the objection as it stands, and see if it presents any real difficulty. That difficulty involves three questions:

1. How can a child have faith upon a rational basis?
2. How can a young person, who has made no special examination of Christian evidence, have such faith?
3. How can men of great intellectual power be destitute of it, supposing the two former classes to possess it?

My answer, in the general, is, that not only may the two former of these classes, prior to any special investigation, have such faith as you speak of, that is, *upon a rational basis*, but that any other feeling, or sentiment in this class, and under the present circumstances of human society, would be in the highest degree *irrational*. On the other hand, that the highest order of intellect, may be destitute of such faith, or rather refuse to use the means of producing it, and in so doing, may act most *irrationally*. Mr. Hamilton, after his opinions changed in regard to this subject, confessed that at one time in his life, he had not paid as much attention to the evidences of Christianity, as to any ordinary case in his practice, for which a retaining fee had been received, and yet, during this very time, was in the habit of sneering at the

credulity of Christians. One of your favorites, mentioned above, Mr. Hume, confessed that he had not read the New Testament with attention, when his argument against miracles was constructed. Are such cases rare at the present day?

Let us, however, look at these different classes, of whom you make mention.

1. As to the faith of a child

To get a proper idea of this, we must look at faith in its simplest form, that which is exercised prior to all experience of the truthfulness or falsehood, either of our own hearts, or of the statements of other persons. Faith, under these circumstances, is the confidence, or reliance, or trust, which an unperverted and undeceived mind would naturally give to any proposition, not in itself contradictory, which is placed before it. If we can conceive of a being who had never either experienced deception, or practiced it, such faith, or confidence, would not only be exercised spontaneously, but under the circumstances of the case, would be rationally so. It is as great an act of folly to doubt without a reason, as to believe without one. And, in this supposed case, all the reasons would be in favor of belief. Any other state of mind, in such case, would indicate either insanity or depravity. The existence of skepticism in the human mind, can only be accounted for, upon the hypothesis of the existence of evil; of deceit, either experienced from others, or practiced by ourselves. "The pure in heart see God."

The truthful have no difficulty in believing a God of truth. This is the trusting spirit of a little child, who befits admission to a heaven of purity. Faith, or confidence, in such a being, is in the highest degree rational: its opposite, a spirit of unbelief, both wrong and irrational. Mr. Hume, you will remember, laid down the principle that children disbelieve, until they learn to believe; a proposition, which throws as much light upon the moral character of the man, as any other fact in his history. One of his opponents showed, not only that such idea was unphilosophical, from the very nature of things, but that it was false, as a matter of fact. Nor would any parent or nurse need argument in regard to this latter position. To believe, prior to our experience, or practice of deceit, is natural, spontaneous, and rational. To disbelieve, in such case, is either foolish or wicked, or both.

But it will demand but very little reflection to see that the faith of young persons, or men of mature age, or even of children beyond the first dawns of intelligence, cannot be of this spontaneous character. In all of these classes deceit has been experienced, and perhaps practiced. Discrimination of testimony becomes natural and necessary. And when the thing to be believed or disbelieved bears upon one's conduct, or interests, an exercise of the will, of certain dispositions in relation to these facts, also takes place. We find this discrimination of testimony, and this exercise of the will in reference to it, at a very early period. From these, in fact, we predicate both the *rationality* and the *morality* of the acts of children. My little boy, for instance, at four years of age, has perfect confidence in my word; for it has been my constant and careful practice never to break a promise, never even in the most trifling matters, to seem to show anything like deception. At the same time, he doubts and disbelieves what is told him by one of the servants, whose word he has learned to distrust. He has, in these cases, a reason both for his doubts and for his faith. It is the intelligent act of a child, only of course so far as his intelligence can go; but this does not alter its essential character.

Suppose, however, that this boy, under present circumstances, should put confidence in those who have always deceived him, or in those, of whose character he is ignorant, that, on the other hand, he should doubt my word, or insist upon further proof, in favor of what I assure him. Would not his want of faith in me be irrational, and his faith in others be equally so? And yet such would be just the irrational conduct of any child, or Sunday scholar, who should set up for a skeptic, in a Christian country. He would refuse to follow those, whose lives were the most veracious in all other respects, and take up with those of an opposite character. And his determination to do this, would show that he was not only foolish, but wicked. In regard to your first point, we therefore see, that the faith of a child in Christianity, is the only state of mind, in such a being that deserves the name of rational. When children or grown people find out, that consistent Christian parents, and friends and acquaintances, are not to be depended upon, either in word or conduct, and when they find that their infidel acquaintances are usually reliable in each of these respects, faith in infidelity, and distrust in Christianity, will become rational. But not until then.

2. How Can The Young Rationally Believe?

This will throw light also upon the second question suggested in your statement, that in regard to the faith of many among the young, of both sexes, who are professors of religion. Many of these, of course, cannot enter upon elaborate investigation of evidence, etc., and you ask, how can they *rationally* believe?

Your question assumes several things which are altogether without foundation. It first assumes that Christianity is of such a character, that there must be in *necessitate rei*, a labored investigation of the external evidence by which its claims are supported, ere intelligent faith in it is possible; which is, by no means, the case. If one confines himself to the reading of infidel books, of course he must, by a thorough investigation, exorcise the demon which he himself has called into being. Or if, like an acquaintance of ours, who used to read both sides, but merely glanced over those works, which were on the side of Christianity, to be able, in a dispute, to say that he had read them, he may, like this, our acquaintance, need to be brought to the edge of the grave, to be led to confess his folly and unfairness. But apart from such superadded difficulties, the facts, upon which Christianity rests, involve no such necessity. No man of ordinary intelligence withholds his belief in the historical fact of such a personage as Alexander of Macedon, or the Emperor Augustus, until he can make an examination of original documents, and of the grounds, upon which the accounts of them are received. The facts of the New Testament are received upon exactly the same *kind* of evidence; the degree, however, of this evidence in its favor, being as ten thousand to one, when compared with that, by which any other historical fact of the same era is supported.

Again, no man, at the present day, rationally doubts the correctness of the Copernican system. But not one in a thousand has demonstrated it. Nor does one in fifty thousand feel that he must laboriously disprove that of Ptolemy, before he receives this of Copernicus. The same rule will apply to the results of scientific theology or biblical criticism. Like all other sciences, these are exact and abstruse, from these many features satisfactory, in their conclusions, to those who will be thorough. But like Astronomy, in every thing else but their results, out of the reach of the large majority of readers. It is not irrational or credulous in other matters, to take

these historical and scientific results, on trust, from those who have made it the business of their lives to investigate the grounds of their reception. Why should it be otherwise in matters of religion? *Pro ratione stat voluntas*. You, for instance, present certain geological difficulties in reference to the correctness of the Mosaic narrative. As to any thing like scientific knowledge of Geology, you of course are perfectly innocent. The mysteries of the Hebrew alphabet even, you have never yet undertaken to unravel. You get *your objection on trust* from some infidel geologist, and *your interpretation on trust* from some infidel or ignorant critic; and when you are possessed of the evidence of Christian Hebraists and geologists for a removal of your difficulties, you talk of credulity! Does this indicate the mind open to conviction? Especially, when it is remembered that some of the most eminent geologists are Christian clergymen, that the proportion of those who regard the language of Moses as consistent with the facts of their science, is as twenty to one of those, who think with yourself; and that the proportion of Christian Hebraists, agreeing in this opinion, to those who are infidel, is much greater. So far then as regards the external evidences, there may be a rational faith exercised by the class, of whom you speak, not upon their own investigation, but upon the testimony of others, whose knowledge and character, and word cannot be called in question.

But Christianity has other evidences, besides those which are external. And this brings to view another of your assumptions. A book may contain *within itself*, evidence perfectly satisfactory of its truth, and genuineness. To my own mind, this is the case with the New Testament. I cannot conceive how any man can come to the conclusion — supposing the historical argument not to exist — that the occurrences related in that book are fictitious. Neither, again, can I understand how an honest man can pretend to receive the facts of the New Testament, and deny the divine commission of Him, who is the subject of it. With the historian Niebuhr, and Mr. Webster, I believe, there is no rational alternative between the supposition that Christ was all that he claimed, or that He was a vile impostor. Men of the very highest order of mind, have avowed their belief in Christianity upon these internal grounds alone; men with whom neither you nor I could for an instant think of placing ourselves in comparison. But this is an argument, which is found in the simple, attentive perusal of the documents, open, therefore, to all; amply sufficient for the unlearned and simple, and, at the same time, commending itself to the most learned and

skilful. Your difficulty, as you imagine it to be, ignores one of the most important departments of proof in the whole field of intellectual and moral conviction. Hundreds of men have lived and died in the Christian faith, their faith resting upon a rational basis, impregnable, who never thought of raising the question of the external evidences. Men who had infinitely more reason for their faith, than some have for their doubts, who know no more of these evidences, than themselves.

Again, the evidence of one's personal experience, may be, by itself, perfectly convincing and unanswerable. Christianity promises certain present effects, upon certain conditions. Every man, who tries these conditions, can say whether the promised blessing, the effect, is secured. Now, there is not to be found in the history of the last eighteen hundred years, a single instance of one fairly making this trial, and being disappointed. No man can find an assertion to that effect upon the page of history. While, on the other hand, thousands of the best and purest of our race, purified, as they assert, by the experiment, have complied with these conditions and have experienced all that was promised. I will not say what is my experience, because you may reply, that I am a party in the dispute. But there are men in our community, and circle of acquaintance; men, whose word you would not dare question upon any other subject, two of them that I could mention, at one time skeptical, like yourself, who are ready to assert that they have made the trial, and by personal experience, know the truth of the gospel of Christ. Such evidence, coming from such men, ought to have its weight upon *your* mind. But however weighty to *yours*, or *others*, it is much more so to the *persons themselves*. I may not be able to place the facts of my own consciousness before any one else. And yet these facts constitute the last and most impregnable ground of my convictions and actions. This class of evidence, as you will perceive, your question has not provided for, or recognized as existing, and is yet a kind of evidence within the reach of all classes, and of equal force with all such classes.

Upon any of these grounds, therefore, the faith of the persons, you mention, would be perfectly rational; would be so prior to their special examination of the external evidences. The fact is, that these external evidences are rather useful for stopping the mouths of dishonest gainsayers, than in producing first conviction. They are important in connection with

other sources of proof, but however satisfactory, by themselves never yet made a man more than an historical Christian, that is, none at all.

I have thus far gone upon another of your unfounded assumptions, namely that this class have no *external* grounds for their convictions. But the fact is, this idea is any thing but correct. There is an immense weight of external evidence in favor of the religion of the New Testament, to this class, which no man can explain away. Nay, under present circumstances, the ground is preoccupied. The man, who doubts, in the face of existing circumstances, the divine origin of Christianity, is called upon to give reasons for his doubts. The burden of proof, by which a system, generally received within the limits of civilization, must be rejected, rests upon him who would dislodge it. It does not come up to the exigencies of modern infidelity, to doubt without any good reason. Positive proof must be offered, by which such doubts are sustained. You find Christianity a great existing fact, claiming to be of divine origin, received and held as such, by the best and wisest of our race for eighteen centuries. You find that wherever it has penetrated, it has created a pure moral sentiment which did not previously exist; that where it has not gone, society has remained stationary, or is retrograding. You find it the purifier and conservator of human society around. And you are bound, when you call its claims in question, to give some better explanation of its origin, and of its effects; to show how, upon your scheme, a system of falsehood has proved a world's benefactor. The common sense argument of the class, to whom you allude, is simply this: what is morally good must be true. Christianity, when consistently followed, is always good, therefore Christianity is true. And this argument is one, which cannot be answered. The present fruits of Christianity, which every one can see, who will, constitute a class of external evidences, in its favor, against which there is nothing to be set, on the other side.

Is it rational or irrational, in view of all these positive facts, on one side, and with these negative objections on the other, to cherish, prior to a full and thorough investigation of the matter, a spirit of skepticism? Would it not be rational, in such case, to believe until compelled to disbelieve? A man may not be satisfied with the evidence in favor of the New Testament. He may even fear that the news is too good to be true. But if he be a lover of his kind, he will desire and hope that it is so. Have you ever reflected that you are as accountable for your doubts, as Christians are for their belief — as much bound to give sound reasons in favor of holding them?

3. Why Hume, Carlyle, Gibbon Cannot Have Faith

Your last point may be briefly disposed of: “why such men as Hume, and Carlyle, and Gibbon, cannot have faith?” The answer is simple, and is to be found in their own lives and writings: they could not, because they would not. Hume, as mentioned above, never entered upon the serious study of the scriptures; was notoriously an impure man in his conversation, if not in positive action. Gibbon’s writings show him to have been a perfectly godless man, worldly and self-sufficient, with a spirit the direct opposite of that of Jesus Christ; and Carlyle, for years, has been an unrestrained scoffer, not only of every form of serious Christianity, but of almost every class, and of every infirmity of his fellow-men. How could such men have moral sympathy with Jesus of Nazareth, or trust in Him as a Savior of sinners? The difficulty here, is not an intellectual, but a moral one; a difficulty which your question does not recognize as in existence.

Let me, in noticing this point, dwell upon the unfairness of contrasting a swearing Gibbon, a scoffing Carlyle, and an unbelieving Hume, with children and ignorant persons, who are Christians. Was this perfectly and altogether fair? Are there not ignorant and childish infidels? Are there not Christians, equal in intellectual power to any of these infidels, that you have mentioned? Why not contrast Hume with Butler or Arnold, Carlyle with Wheewell or Chalmers; and Gibbon with Robert Hall or Isaac Taylor? Why not compare the unlearned infidel with the unlearned Christian, and then ask for the rational grounds of their respective opinions? And so as to these of a higher order of mind? How, as classes, do they stand, of both of these orders of mind — as men of pure morals — as useful members of society? If a Christian be consistent, what sort of a man is he? How the infidel? Christians are often charged with hypocrisy, the charge, implying that the system and profession are good. Has such charge ever been brought against infidels? Is there any thing good enough in their system to afford ground for such charge?

I have thus, as I conceive, answered your question. Let me suggest one or two, before closing.

Questions For The Unbeliever

“Harris,” said an infidel lawyer to another gentleman of the same profession, who was a Christian, “Harris, suppose after all, that you should be mistaken in this matter: what then?”

“Suppose Richards,” was the reply, “that it should turn out that you are mistaken: what then?”

To this latter question, a dead silence was the reply.

I would, in substance, repeat this question. "Suppose that you, as an infidel, are right, and I, as a Christian, am wrong: what can I lose? Suppose that I am right, and that you are wrong: how then? The possibility is most frightful to contemplate! But apart from the terrific consequences of infidelity, in another world, if Christianity be true, I may ask: what benefit, social, moral or intellectual, do you expect, by your infidelity, to confer upon the world? *What real comfort does it now afford yourself?* It is easy to swear, and scoff, and object. But you do not build up yourself, in throwing down others. Suppose you should succeed in making infidels of all your young acquaintances, do you think that you they would be bettered by it, in any respect? I know not how you may answer these questions. I rather think that you are afraid seriously to ask them. But I know full well what those answers ought to be: that the man who shakes the faith of another, is usually his destroyer, not only for this world, but for that world which lies beyond the grave; that world, for which the infidel makes no calculation. There are men in our circle of acquaintance, who, from being infidel, have become Christians. You may deny that they are *better*, but do they not seem to be happier? Have they not become more careful and conscientious in the various relations of life? Again, there are some few cases, in this, our circle of acquaintance, of men who even professing to be Christians, have become worldly, practical infidels. Have they improved by the change? How many of them have become wrecks, morally and socially? If it were proper to mention names, the answer to these questions would be startling.

Let me remind you, also, of what was insisted upon in the beginning of this letter: that in proportion to a man's own integrity, will be his disposition to believe, until falsehood be manifest. This is the ultimate basis of reliance upon others. When this is gone, and the habit is formed of falsehood, or sophistication, or levity, or one-sided, or thoughtless reasoning, upon

serious subjects, the case of such a one becomes almost hopeless. Skepticism, which trusts neither God nor man, becomes the depraved habit of the soul. Faith to a truthful heart is the easiest thing in the world; to a heart, which is untruthful, such faith becomes an impossibility. While the grounds of human belief are not purely subjective; while both to the honest and dishonest mind, evidence objective to ourselves may be examined, yet our view of the evidence, and the conclusion which we reach through it, will be greatly dependent upon the state of our moral affections. The act of faith involves not only an intellectual process, weighing of evidence, reasoning, etc., but also an exercise of the will, a voluntary determination. The intellect and will, in such case, act so rapidly and habitually, that we are hardly aware of the complex process, which involves our faith or unbelief. But such process, nevertheless, goes on. And it is this fact, which gives faith and unbelief their moral character; which makes one commendable, the other condemnable... The faith has a reason, upon which it rests; and there was as a previous willingness to look for, to give heed, and to see this reason. On the other hand, "He that believeth not shall be damned." Not for his infirmity, but because, in a question of duty, he has slighted and evaded evidence by which that duty might have been clearly seen and understood.

Here, then, I leave the subject. I feel myself accountable for my belief. The tone of levity, in which you often indulge, leads me to fear, that you do not sufficiently realize your accountability for your doubts. If I should succeed in impressing a sense of this accountability upon your mind, I should anticipate a speedy removal of those doubts. Remember, it is the infirmity of an honest mind, to believe until compelled to disbelieve; that it is proof of a dishonest and depraved one, to disbelieve until forced to believe.

You can lose nothing upon your own scheme, if you give Christianity a full, serious, and unprejudiced examination. You may lose every thing, both upon the scheme of nature and of revelation, by treating it in any other way. He that will do the will of God, so far as he knows, shall know further of his doctrine. Throwing the Bible aside, you know enough of the will of God, as seen in the constitution of our own minds, and in the world around us, to be able to say that truth only reveals itself to the unprejudiced. Truth, to any other state of mind, can neither be seen nor appreciated. Be thus honest, candid, serious and unprejudiced; refrain from retailing your doubts, until they can be proved to be well founded; be thorough in your investigation,

and you may rest assured, that, although even then you may fall short of becoming a Christian in heart, you will become so in intellect; will be compelled to admit, like many around you, that those, and those only, who receive, and act upon its precepts, deserve the name of rational beings; that insanity or depravity is the only explanation of any other course.

One thing more, and I have done. I have insisted upon fairness, and the absence of prejudice; upon the impropriety of giving the benefit of all doubts and difficulties, that may come up, to the cause of infidelity. But I may, in closing, advance a step further. I am willing to assume the position, that something more than a position of pure indifference, is demanded of every man of ordinary intelligence, who enters upon such an investigation, as that of which I have been speaking; further, that this prior position of pure indifference cannot be taken without moral delinquency, on the part of him who does so. Christianity professes to confer upon you a great favor; to put in your reach, at least, the greatest of all possible benefits: and to have done this at a mighty sacrifice of love and of suffering. Now, prior to the examination of Christian evidences, you cannot but admit that this profession is *possibly* founded in truth; that there is, at least, a *possibility*, that you are under a most weighty obligation of gratitude, to the Author of Christianity. Now is it ingenuous, or proper, morally proper, I mean, to consent to occupy a position of pure indifference, until it is demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt, that such obligation is in existence? Does not the mere possibility of such favor being conferred, create an obligation on our part, to a favorable and affectionate examination? How do we act in matters of this sort, not connected with religion? I am told, for instance, that my life, or my property have been saved by another, in a manner, of which I was not aware. A friend, a brother, or a beloved child, sick and friendless, in a distant land, has found among strangers a friend and benefactor. I am told of these benefactors, and I deliberately assume a position of pure indifference; repress and withhold every expression and emotion of gratitude; and enter upon a vigorous scrutiny of all the evidence by which the existence of my obligation is demonstrated; by which I may be satisfied beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the benefit is not a questionable one, and was not conferred from sinister or doubtful motives! What would be said of the wretch who, under the circumstances, would pursue such a course? Beginning in such spirit, is it not more than probable that, in the end, he would neither see, nor admit the fact of his obligations? And yet

this is substantially the course of those, who are merely indifferent in their examination of the evidences of Christianity. If Christ died for you; if you deserved to die when His sacrifice was made, then are you under the heaviest obligations to Him, your Savior and Benefactor. And until you are positively certain that such is not the fact, which you cannot be, until you have gone through this examination, His gospel must be regarded with any other feelings than those of opposition or indifference. The mere possibility of its truth, with every right-minded man, should annihilate every such feeling. The mere possibility, that a fellow-creature has done me a favor, is enough, and ever should be enough to ensure him kind treatment at my hands. Until I positively know otherwise, I may, through unkindness, or mere indifference, outrage my benefactor. Let the same rule be acted upon in reference to that great benefactor, who affirms that he laid down his life for your salvation. You cannot, as a matter of fact, assume a position of indifference to the gospel of Christ. If you are not for it, you are against it. If you do not give it the benefit of all difficulties and doubtful questions, you will give this benefit to the cause of a godless infidelity. But even if this were not the fact, even if you could be perfectly indifferent, you would, in being so, act most culpably; would be treating a possible friend and benefactor as a certain stranger and enemy; would exhibit that kind of unfairness, which finds its origin in the most hateful and loathsome of all crimes, that of ingratitude.

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Originally published 1854 in the *Evangelical Review*, Vol. 5.

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ISBN: TBD

How Can You Find Peace With God?

The most important thing to grasp is that no one is made right with God by the good things he or she might do. Justification is by faith only, and that faith resting on what Jesus Christ did. It is by believing and trusting in His one-time *substitutionary* death for your sins.

Read your Bible steadily. God works His power in human beings through His Word. Where the Word is, God the Holy Spirit is always present.

Suggested Reading: [New Testament Conversions](#) by Pastor George Gerberding

Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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