Reasons *to* Believe

One Man's Journey Among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind

john marks

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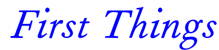

In the fall of 2003, on assignment for the CBS news show *60 Minutes,* I went home to Dallas, Texas, in search of interview candidates for a segment on evangelical Christians. I made the decision casually. My hometown had more than its share of evangelicals. I didn't expect to find a lost piece of myself there.

As a producer for Morley Safer, I had begun work on a story about a series of novels inspired by the Christian version of the end of the world, and one of the authors, the Reverend Tim LaHaye, had agreed to appear at a Prophecy Conference in the Dallas suburb of Garland. For the story, I wanted to find fans of the books who could talk with enthusiasm about what the novels had meant to them—the assumption being that these books, unlike most popular fiction, had an appeal that went well beyond entertainment.

Pastors at several churches gave me names and phone numbers. I found Don and Lillie McWhinney through a church in Denton, Texas, and they agreed to meet me for lunch at a prime rib restaurant among a twist of freeways and toll roads in north Dallas. At the time, I had no earthly idea how important they would become to me, or this book, but I was struck by their presence immediately. Don, a former oil executive, had dressed in a dark blue business suit, Lillie in a beige pantsuit. They were both trim, good-

looking people. Don had the bigger personality. A man in his midsixties, with snow white hair and beetling white eyebrows, with a sonorous voice to match, Don looked and sounded like a local anchorman. He often began a thought with my first name, "You see, John," and when the words came out of his mouth, they had a stylized flair. They sounded like scripted lines. Don told me that he often worked as a chaplain in the Dallas area, making visits to corporate offices and patients in hospice care, and it made sense. You could hear him delivering an impromptu message in an elevator, at the water cooler, in a cubicle during lunch hour, or in the afternoon quiet of a house where someone slowly passed away. When he stopped talking, the silence dropped like a barbell.

Lillie, a small, attractive woman in her fifties, with big eyes and a sly smile, was less imposing. She wasn't at all shy, but her manner and physical presence conveyed a certain fragility that seemed, at first, to be at odds with her robust sense of spiritual urgency. She listened closely to Don and never interrupted, but he would often turn to her and say, "Lillie, tell him what you told me just the other day."

The McWhinneys ordered the prime rib, and for an hour I quizzed them about their faith. The lunch was an audition. I asked them if they liked the Left Behind books, and Don praised them. The Left Behind books were works of history, he maintained, set in the future rather than the past, and he compared them to fictionalized accounts of the story of the *Titanic*. Lillie liked them too, but Don was the enthusiast. They both believed that events recounted in the novels would one day come to pass. They believed in the Rapture, when Jesus would come and spirit away his people. They believed in the Tribulation, when God would allow the Antichrist to govern those people on earth who had been left behind. And they certainly believed in God's final retribution, when all nonbelievers would be destroyed. Lillie said that she sometimes liked to imagine what the Rapture would feel like; she gazed at the sky above her backyard and imagined some mundane morning when she would look out of her kitchen window and see spirits flying beyond the roofs of homes into the sunlight. And yet, as Don and Lillie described the historical inevitability of the annihilation of most of the human race, they did so without the slightest trace of malevolence. They were almost sweet about

it. By the end of an hour, I had decided that Don McWhinney would make an ideal interview candidate.

Typically, the meeting would have ended there, but just as the couple were finishing their meals, it became clear that Don had something else on his mind. He peered at me across the table. I was struck again by those looks. With those bushy white eyebrows, with his blue eyes and snowy hair, he seemed the Hollywood ideal of benevolent goodness come to life. When God called, Don McWhinney would go to heaven, and the belief had transformed his very flesh.

"You've asked us a lot of questions," Don said. I nodded. "May I ask you a question?" A stillness settled on the table. I knew what was coming. Lillie watched my face. I braced for it.

"Will you be left behind?"

WOULD I BE left behind? In other words, had I been saved by the grace of Jesus Christ? Or would I be left to face the torments of hell, or the violence of hell on earth, should the end come during my lifetime? It struck me as the most remarkable question imaginable, and at the same time, maybe the most American. According to the preeminent pollster in the evangelical world, George Barna, the United States has more born-again Christians than any other country in the world, some 100 million people who are "assured of eternal salvation solely because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior." And a majority of these believers told the pollster they had shared their faith with a non-Christian. They had posed the Don McWhinney question, in effect. The proper verb for that is "witness": to witness is to share or impart a sense of one's own faith to another. Scripture calls believers to do so as often as possible—to become a living witness to their own redemption, testifying of the event. Black and Hispanic believers are more likely to witness to nonbelievers than whites. These figures, the pollster informs, have remained the same for about a decade, which means, if the poll is even roughly correct, that within the previous year more than 50 million Americans had posed a question like the one Don McWhinney posed to me to a fellow American. In my lifetime, hundreds of millions had been put on the spot.

Would I be left behind? The question should have been easy to dismiss. On the face of it, the words were offensive and ludicrous, the kind of thing that so often invites scorn toward evangelical Christians. But I didn't dismiss the question. I didn't laugh or condescend.

In fact, I took Don's words very seriously. They hadn't startled me. I had half expected them. But they took on a bizarre force in the banal atmosphere of the prime rib restaurant, amid the click of fork against plate, as the knife of a carver whispered through a haunch of beef. This wasn't a dream. The question leapt off the pages of a work of fiction and into that small corner of the real world.

Would I be left behind? Because we had been discussing the Left Behind books, Don had framed the question in this way. But there are countless ways to ask. The word choice can be poetically beautiful or bluntly ridiculous. It can be sung on a radio station, signed on a highway, sighed by a lover in or out of bed, or couched in utter and impressive silence, understood by the hearer implicitly, in the form of what is called "lifestyle evangelism." This is when believers demonstrate behavior in their lives that will make nonbelievers question their own beliefs. I have seen the question in a Bible verse painted in bright red ink on the side of a golf ball—"Read John 3:16–17"—meant to be hit into a sand trap and found by a lost and seeking soul. I have seen it in the form of a simple child's game, a kind of Rubik's Cube called the Evangecube, made of a series of plastic squares and covered in images that tell the story of Christian redemption, meant to wordlessly unfold in the hands of the damned, used as a tool of conversion by 1.5 million believers since the year 2000, or so claims the website. I have heard the message scored to electric guitars at rock concerts, confessed from the mouth of a contrite Hollywood movie star, from countless preachers and close friends, and once, memorably, on a T-shirt in Central Asia, "For God so loved Kazakhstan . . ."

On that day, Don went for maximum dramatic effect. But the effect was not all—he believed in the words. The possible end of the prime rib–scented world came to life right then and there, and the restaurant dimmed a bit in its shadow. Don and Lillie truly believed that these biblical events might be approaching. The Rapture might come soon.

There would be no time for explanations or apologies. Their confidence appalled me.

"I will definitely be left behind," I told him.

"Why?" asked Lillie.

"Because I don't believe."

Once, though, I had. That was the most unsettling thing about the question. Don and Lillie McWhinney sounded utterly familiar to me. As infuriating as it was, the question posed by this upper-middle-class north Dallas man was oddly comforting, like words spoken in the voice of a grandparent long passed away. Nothing had changed in my hometown. I might have left these people far behind, but they had remained where they were, rock solid, unmoved by politics, culture, or society, or so I thought at the time, a force of immovable belief. I knew them so well that I almost wanted to accommodate them, answer in the negative just to acknowledge the old bond: "No, Don, of course I won't be left behind." But that was impossible. I had left the fold for good.

"I don't find Jesus Christ, as savior, to be a convincing or even compelling idea," I told them, rather glibly. "He was a great human being. His teachings have endured. But the world is complete without him. Its sheer plentitude dwarfs the idea that one man, born more than 2 billion years after its creation, is the key that fits all locks. He's just not necessary."

I was getting heated as I spoke, could feel my blood pressure rising. My words made no impression at all on Lillie. "What about sin?" she asked me.

She had told me earlier in the lunch that she led a Bible study for young married women, many of whom were in bad and even abusive marriages. With the help of Christ, she had convinced most of these women to stay in their marriages and try to work things out. She was not one to surrender a point. Nor was I.

"Sin is just another word for death," I replied. "As one way of looking at death, it's interesting, but it's not adequate to the task of explaining evil or suffering in the world."

"No," she corrected me. "I mean your own sin."

This was incredibly presumptuous. I was a television producer here to interview her, after all. What was she thinking? But I also felt self-conscious,

like a teenager caught smoking a cigarette in the school bathroom. I also felt that I owed them a few answers. After all, they had sat and answered mine about their personal beliefs for an hour.

"I have my struggles," I told her.

"In my case, for instance," she went on in her pleasurable drawl, more or less ignoring my reply, "my great sin is fear. I am a person who is very afraid of the world. I couldn't overcome that fear without the Lord. I tried and tried, but it wasn't until I fell on my knees and let Christ take over that I was healed."

Her confession moved me. Much later, I found out why, but at that moment, this fragile woman looked afraid. With her big, soft eyes, pale skin, and tentative manner, she looked like someone who had been hiding in the dark for a long time. Maybe she was afraid of Don, I thought, though it didn't seem so; on the contrary, in a subtle way, he seemed to defer to her. Maybe she feared her own shadow. Certainly she was afraid of death, and Jesus allayed her fear. I could relate to that. I was afraid, too. I had been in New York City on September 11 and rode in a subway to work every morning, or drove across a bridge or through a tunnel. I feared terrorism. I feared for my wife and son. I feared death. But why should her newfound courage in Christ depend upon the obliteration of others? Why should my son and wife have to suffer endless torment for her peace of mind?

Lillie backed off. She and Don told me I was a thoughtful person and thanked me for being honest. There were no hard feelings. A few weeks later, after Don did the interview with Morley Safer, he handed me a gift to give to my son Joe, a box of Hot Wheel cars, and I took them back to my hotel room. On the face of it, the gesture had the same sweetness as their conversation. The McWhinneys have boys of their own, all grown-up, and I'm certain that they meant the Hot Wheels as a sincere token of affection. But I couldn't get it out of my mind that they were gifts for a boy doomed to cosmic incineration. A day later, when I checked out of the hotel, I left the Hot Wheels in the room.

IF THE MCWHINNEYS had known, I doubt they would have understood, but I had my reasons, which I will now try to explain. On the day of that

lunch, I withheld crucial information. I didn't tell the couple that my wife and son were Jewish. It certainly wasn't shame or guilt. The McWhinneys would not have minded the idea of my having a Jewish mate. On the contrary, I believe they would have been spiritually titillated by the news. For evangelicals, Jews are the closest thing to hard evidence in this life of the truth of the Christian message. It's a paradox. Jews have become, in the last half century, the living fulfillment of end-time prophecies, their status as God's chosen people confirmed by their longevity, by their prosperity, and by their immense suffering. In this scenario, even the inexplicable horror of the Holocaust has a specific meaning and purpose—6 million men, women, and children subjected to atrocious death in German concentration camps as part of a divine plan that would underscore God's displeasure with his people's rejection of Christ and hasten the day to their final redemption in the land of their forefathers. Similarly, the birth of the state of Israel in 1948 told evangelicals that this final redemption lay at hand. The countdown had begun. The Bible had predicted that, before the end, the Jews would return to the Holy Land, and they had. Next they must rebuild the Temple of Solomon, and when that happens, prophecy says, the end is come. Without the Jews in Jerusalem, everything would look like coincidence. As it is, everything looks inevitable.

What does this have to do with my wife and son? For me, Debra and Joe are the most precious creatures on earth, and they have nothing to do with faith or prophecy or religious truth. They are as immediate, as elemental, as sunlight, air, and water. But for Don and Lillie McWhinney and tens of millions of others, they become members of the prophetic race—markers, if you will—and God has a special plan for them. In my eyes, this doesn't elevate my wife and son in stature. It reduces them to a biblical statistic. For this reason, I didn't reveal the truth to Don and Lillie. It would have felt somehow like a conspiracy against my own family, a collusion with their version of the universe to unmask my wife and son as members of that holy race. In fact, Debra and Joe lay at the heart of my resistance to everything that Don and Lillie stood for: a reduction of the world in all its infinite mystery to a formula; human beings, in all their complexity, turned into fixed points on an ancient map. Forget the two thousand years of history that had occurred

since the exile of the Jews from Palestine. Forget Spinoza, Mendelssohn, and Kafka. Forget Debra and Joe. All that was as the blink of an eye. The Jews had returned to Jerusalem. Jesus would come.

IT DIDN'T OCCUR to me, at the time, that I was reducing Don and Lillie to equally simplistic figures, that I robbed them of their human mystery and singularity in the same way they appeared to me to rob Debra and Joe. I left that lunch in a state of extreme agitation. In more ways than one, time had fallen away. Decades of my own life had collapsed, and the life of the race, too. Behind the infinite detail of daily life lay centuries in which nothing had occurred but the slow creep of immortal destiny. This wasn't just the case for Jews. Every vanished life was but a spark in the robe of God. I drove on the LBJ Freeway—the Lyndon Baines Johnson Freeway, named after the American president who had shepherded the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through Congress, who had committed tens of thousands of troops to the Vietnam War, who had stepped into the shoes of John F. Kennedy after he was assassinated in my hometown in 1963, but what did all of this matter in the vast tapestry of divinity? I was gripped by memories of a faith that I had left behind—there is more than one meaning to those words—and shaken by the fact that this faith, once safely abandoned, had now come to haunt me, politically and culturally. What had once been my personal struggle suddenly felt to me like the precursor to a much greater and larger struggle.

Who was I on the day when Don McWhinney asked me the question, which, he believed, came from a force outside of him, placed in his mouth with a cosmic purpose by a destiny to which he had dedicated his entire life? Who was the man to whom he addressed his urgent concern? A heterosexual white male, forty years old, husband and father of one, a resident of Brooklyn, the most diverse city in the United States, a producer for the top-rated news show on American television, *60 Minutes*, a published author of two critically acclaimed, commercially unsuccessful novels of war and revolution in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, a German speaker, a native Texan, a fanatical glutton for certain kinds of American pop culture, with an inordinate love of westerns and horror movies, a sloppy love for old-time country music, a child of the 1970s, a long-time admirer of the 1960s, whose oldest

and closest male friend was a proud gay fellow son of Dallas and author of a Pulitzer Prize–winning play about an East German transvestite, a thoroughly contemporary man who had lived for five years in sin with his Jewish girlfriend before marrying her, who hadn't voted in an American presidential election until he was thirty, but since then had voted Republican twice, for Rudy Giuliani for mayor of New York, and otherwise for Democrats, a descendant of Methodists and Presbyterians, Creek Indians and English settlers, with hints and rumors of Jewish blood floating around, a pessimist, a hedonist, a committed, happy, straight-up pagan.

But from the age of sixteen, I had believed like Don and Lillie. It seems impossible now, but it was true. I marvel at the intensity of what gripped me. In high school, I had been a pretty good student. I had acted on the stage, written short stories that had nothing to do with faith, made friends who were serious drinkers and drug users. I had never stopped listening to rock and roll or loving zombie movies dripping with extreme gore. And yet during those same years, I had never touched alcohol or drugs. I had never slept with a girl. I had never even touched a girl's breast. I didn't take the Lord's name in vain. I read my Bible every morning and memorized verses that I carried around with me in my wallet. I prayed all the time. Who had I been? What was this belief?

By the time I met Debra, I felt as if a huge gulf separated me from those younger days. By then, among other sins against the old belief, I had lost my virginity and started to drink. I had tried pot and lived with a woman who was not my wife, and I saw those experiences as evidence of the slow inrush of sanity. I had studied history, philosophy, and theology and discovered that my belief had deep roots, a complicated genealogy. I had discovered that European thinkers had been grappling with the loss of the Christian faith for two centuries at least. At the same time, I hadn't stopped believing in God altogether. That happened five years later, in the Balkans, when I caught a small glimpse of the hell that human beings make for themselves on earth and could no longer reasonably believe in the existence of a sovereign being. From then on, it seemed inconceivable to me that a meaningful, not to speak of a loving god could be in charge of this world. It's an old story in the history of Christianity, this moment of negative revelation, and it had become mine.

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MILLIONS OF BELIEVERS came to a different conclusion, of course. As I was leaving the faith, something profound was happening in the body of the faithful, a metamorphosis with great implications for the future. In the 1980s, a small group of activists, some with familiar names—Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Tim LaHaye—began to organize a loosely affiliated group of believers of all denominations into a potent political force that came to be known as the Moral Majority and claimed to speak for vast numbers of Christian Americans beleaguered by the social, cultural, and sexual transformations that had come out of the 1960s. The galvanizing political moment had occurred in 1973, with the Supreme Court decision in *Roe* v. *Wade*, upholding a woman's right to have an abortion, but the shock of that moment took years to build into a consensus, carrying with it waves of resentment over the changing roles of women, the frank sexuality on display in movies and music, the banning of prayer from schools, and new discoveries in molecular biology and other sciences that seemed to reduce religion to a form of backwater ignorance. Along with these developments came a rebellion against all authority, political and otherwise, that culminated in the impeachment of Richard Nixon but had its analogues in the community of churchgoers, too, where young people found it hard to accept the old hierarchies of religious obedience. My faith had not been political at all, but as my contemporaries grew up, those who continued to believe met a world that outraged them, and they began to feel like a people under attack. They responded by shaping a future more compatible with their vision of the world. For a long time, this meant withdrawal from the mainstream American experience, into homeschooling and private Christian schools and colleges, as well as a retreat from the culture of Hollywood and the morass of Washington, D.C., except as lobbyists. Now it means the opposite; it means engagement.

Once, when I returned to Dallas after college, I had coffee with one of my best friends from high school, a woman named Margaret. She had been one of the funniest people in our school. She had shiny red hair that fell straight to her shoulders, topped, most of the time, by a bright red or green bow. She had freckles and pale skin that made her seem an unlikely deliv-

ery system for pitiless judgments on the various phonies and fakes in high school. Her deadpan had no equal. Margaret had participated in church activities and camp, but had never struck me as dogmatic or preachy. But when we had coffee, and I told her I had been reading Nietzsche and other thinkers, and that I no longer believed in Jesus Christ as the son of God, she said, "See, that's the problem. You've been overeducated." Years later, sitting in a church in Denton, Texas, a less wealthy, less highfalutin northern cousin to Dallas, I would hear a preacher explicitly speak about that "Highland Park kid who fell in love with Hegel and Marx and fell out of love with Jesus," and the judgment awaiting him, and think of Margaret's assessment of me.

At the time, over that cup of coffee, I recognized a new language. She wasn't just talking about my own personal lapse. In her own way, using ideas that had begun to reverberate throughout Christian circles, she was referring to the state of the nation. "See," she'd said, grasping a wider pattern. Others, too, had been "overeducated." I was not alone in my heresy. And it wasn't just a surplus of intellectual activity; it was the content of that education. Margaret could have been a member of the Moral Majority. She wanted evolution out of textbooks and women out of abortion clinics. She worried about the decline of culture and the destruction of the American family. But what mattered, what lay behind it all, was her sense that the rising secular culture not only disdained her beliefs. It ruled them out. *I* ruled them out.

My politics swung sharply to the left during those years, but while most of my friends disliked evangelicals for their political positions, I had a more complicated reaction. I knew and liked plenty of evangelicals personally, but I also had a much deeper dread of them as a political force—an irrational dread, or so I thought. I feared the triumph of their worldview. I feared its constriction, its nihilism, its hatred of the world, and their theologically justified desire for a final act of destruction. I feared their belief that all meaning lay in one consecrated truth. And most of all I feared their belief that I had become, in my own beliefs, an ally of the devil. In the minds of Margaret and people like her, I was worse than lost. I had become the enemy.

Slowly, my own worldview expanded and I came to see these people and their beliefs with a little less dread. In my twenties, I began a long and difficult intellectual journey to find my own understanding of the world, my own

gods, my own devils. My fear of evangelicals abated, and a curiosity grew. After college, I traveled to India to get a firsthand taste of the world's religions in one place, everything from animism and Hinduism to Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and, of course, Christianity. While there, two experiences shaped my thought on evangelicals in deep ways.

First, while in Kashmir, I came upon the tomb of Jesus Christ. I initially thought that it was a kind of ancient hoax. My Muslim friends assured me that it wasn't. There had been a tradition for many centuries in Kashmir that Christ had been rescued from the cross and smuggled out of Palestine. Eventually, he made his way to Kashmir, where he became a favorite of the local prince and died with honors. The tomb sat in a dilapidated corner of Srinagar and couldn't possibly have been two thousand years old, but it didn't matter. All of a sudden, in the face of a completely different account of the life and death of Jesus, I came to see the historical underpinnings of religious belief, the way that local tradition and superstitions are shaped by politics, economics, and geography. The point wasn't that Jesus had actually died in Kashmir. The point was that people in Kashmir really believed that he had died and was buried there. For them, he wasn't the founder of a religion. He was a revered local saint. And that suggested the possibility of other, more historically accurate points of view on the subject.

More important, perhaps, I became friends with a devout Sufi who tried to convert me to Islam. And in his efforts to make me see his way, the light of his truth, I saw a mirror of the person I had been. In my friend Amin, who had a sincere and devout belief in Allah as well as a penchant for sleeping with Scandinavian girls who backpacked to Lake Dal, I understood that there were many faiths in this world, and most of them wanted adherents, and all of them centered upon an absolute truth that could admit of no other absolute claims. Amin told me that his greatest desire in this life was to disappear like a drop of sunlit water in the great sea of God's mercy and truth. To me, that thought was horrifying. I didn't want to disappear into anything. Amin listened to me and shook his head. I simply didn't understand. Had I still been a Christian, I would have tried to convince him that he was the one who didn't understand, but those days were past. And he didn't seem offended that I rejected his belief. It was a benign encounter.

Years later, on September 11, 2001, in New York City, I saw the smoke rising at the end of my island and thought of Amin. What did he now believe? Did he believe what the men in the airplanes believed? Surely not. He would have been as appalled as I was.

IN THE YEARS before September 11, I forgot about Margaret Williams, I forgot about being overeducated, and I worried less about the movement the more I grew away from my years as a believer. Now and then, my sister and I would laugh about it. She had gone through a similar experience. After scratching up my old Led Zeppelin albums and speaking in tongues in a Bible study with a popular cheerleader, she came out the other end, still a Christian, no longer militant, not much worse for the wear. I could even acknowledge some of the benefits of my evangelical period. Close readings of the Bible had influenced my secular reading and writing in positive ways. I had a serious knowledge of what is arguably the most important text in Western civilization. My experience of religion helped me to understand what was happening in the Balkans and elsewhere in the world, which made me a better reporter. But mostly, those years belonged to a distant past that no longer weighed on me.

In the meantime, close friends had remained in the faith, and family members had converted. These friends and family are Bible-believing Christians, homeschoolers, pro-life, anti-gay marriage, and I love them and respect them. I never asked them what they think of my family or me. I don't really care. My wife and I have raised our son in a relaxed way as a Jew, though we celebrate Christmas, too. My oldest friend, a gay man, served in our wedding, and gay couples danced at the reception. No one made an issue of this. But they don't have to. If they're traditional evangelical Christians, I know what they believe. They believe, as the McWhinneys do, that come the day of the Rapture, I and mine will be left behind. I will be destroyed, as will my wife, my son, and my gay friends. It's nothing personal. They love me, but salvation knows no loopholes.

Until recently, none of this would have bothered me. This is a free country, and we are all entitled to believe what we want, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else. Even now, I would never suggest that my cousins, aunts, and uncles should lose the right to believe whatever they choose. Who am I to

exercise such a judgment? But do they have the right to assert their belief as a national religion? Do they have the right to run a country filled with tens of millions of people, who will, according to their beliefs, be left behind? Can a pluralist democracy absorb and support an exclusive, nonpluralist religious belief at the heart of its system?

If so, who gets left behind? It occurred to me that, on the day of the Dallas lunch, Don and Lillie weren't just putting their question to me. They were putting it to the entire country. After a while, I began to feel they deserved a real answer.

THE *60 MINUTES* piece on the Left Behind books led the show on a Sunday night in February 2004. In addition to highlighting the popularity of the novels, the segment drew connections between the Christian fans of the book and the evangelical president, George W. Bush. A few days after the segment aired, Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* opened in theaters, quickly becoming one of the most popular films of all time, a fact that seemed to underscore the relevance of this group of people, these Christians. Friends and colleagues of mine in New York began to ask about them in worried tones. Who were they, exactly? What did they want? None of my answers reassured them, and that was partly because I didn't know myself how to respond. My years as a believer lay far behind me, and my few months of research for the *60 Minutes* segment barely scratched the surface of this community, which appeared to outsiders like cross-wielding armies running ambushes out of valleys where they had somehow hidden from view. It was a false but powerful impression that was reinforced by the 2004 elections several months later. After that, for a time, a rhythm was established. Every month or so, Christian energy burst again onto the national stage—the Terry Schiavo case, the marriage amendment, the nomination of Harriet Miers, the box office success of the first in the implicitly Christian series of Narnia movies—and I felt again the division in my life, in the country. I felt again the need to produce some kind of answer, a genuine response to the questions that now seem to come from everywhere.

Going into the 2008 elections, four years after I started work on this project, the political and cultural landscape seems to have changed dramatically for believers, and yet less has changed than meets the eye. George W. Bush has been tarnished in their eyes by his stance on immigration, his troubled war in Iraq, and his failure to deliver major victories for Christian values. Though he vigorously opposed an expansion of stem cell research, and appointed two conservative judges to the Supreme Court, many Christians came to believe that his administration considered them to be useful tools—but fools.

Major conservative Christian political figures have left the stage: Tom DeLay in the wake of corruption scandals, Senator Rick Santorum voted out of office in 2006 in Pennsylvania, and the late Reverend Jerry Falwell. Falwell's death last year, in particular, marked the end of an era in the relationship between Christians and Republican politics. That alliance, built in the 1980s and 1990s, faces real challenge as a new generation of Christians, baby boomers and their children, reassess the legacy of the Moral Majority.

The reassessment will not lead to a withdrawal from politics. On the contrary, these last few years have meant a new beginning. For the first time in decades, mainstream America has taken Christianity seriously as a social and cultural force. Evangelicals have made the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and many believers now see Bono of the band U2 as representative of their role in the world. They want more influence where it counts—in mainstream media, in state houses and Congress, in the public square. Church is no longer home. The world is.

For these reasons, I have come to feel that Don and Lillie McWhinney, and every other Christian who asks, deserves a real answer to their question. For years, I asked it myself, but I have come to feel that it can no longer be ignored by anyone. Not answering, I believe, now constitutes a threat to the democracy. Not answering means a silence resulting in dreadful things that I don't even want to contemplate as yet. After all, the askers are my fellow Americans. They pay taxes as I do; they hold the same passport; they breathe the same air. They believe the salvation of my soul, the health of the nation, the future of the species, and the pleasure of God, depends upon the answer

that I give. So here it is, from the bottom of my heart, using every ounce of my intellect and emotion, plumbing the depths of what I once believed, traveling the country and the world with my skills as a reporter, my attempt to respond fully and completely. Will I be left behind? You're holding the answer in your hands.