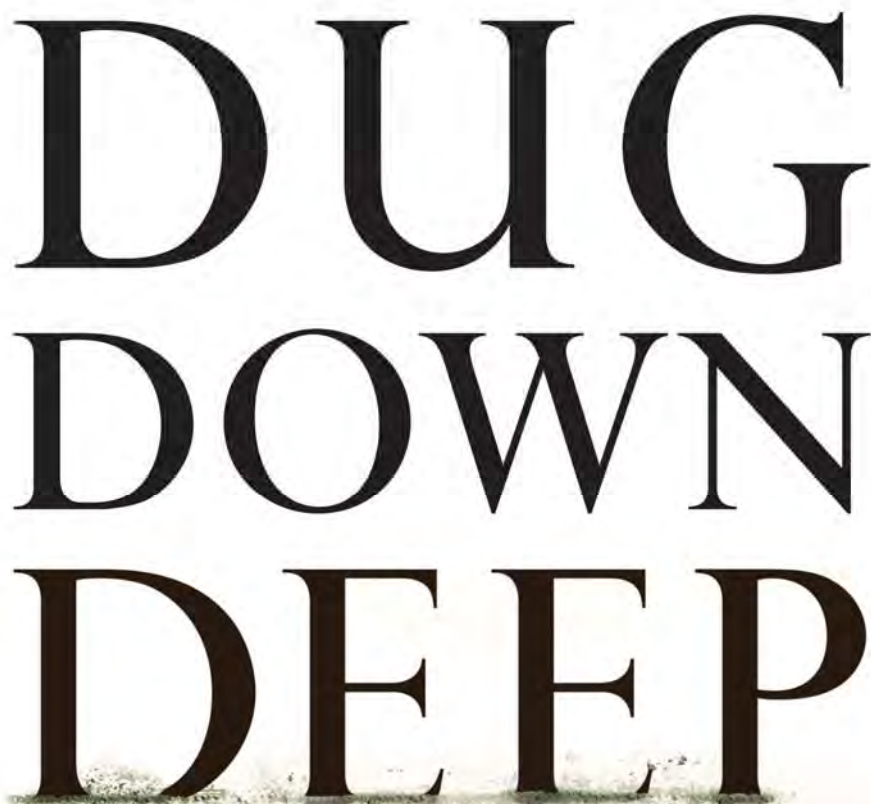


"If you're tired of hyped promises and want essential truth, this book is for you."

—DONALD MILLER, author of *Blue Like Jazz*

DUG DOWN DEEP



*Unearthing What I Believe
and Why It Matters*

JOSHUA
HARRIS

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Dug Down Deep

“More than forty years of quadriplegia has underscored to me the matchless value of knowing—really knowing—the doctrines of the Christian faith. *Dug Down Deep* reveals how biblical doctrine provides a pathway to understanding the heart and mind of God. If you’re looking for ‘that one book’ that will push you farther down the road to faith than you’ve ever journeyed before, *Dug Down Deep* is it. I highly recommend it!”

—JONI EARECKSON TADA, author; founder and CEO,
International Disability Center, Agoura Hills, CA

“In *Dug Down Deep* my longtime friend Joshua Harris explains the basics of Christian theology in a way all of us can understand. He is a humble man and teaches humbly. If you are tired of hyped promises and want essential truth, this book is for you. As religious fads come and go, the truths in this book will last.”

—DONALD MILLER, author of *Blue Like Jazz*

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“Josh says that this book is his ‘reveling in theology in my own simple way.’ Having read it, I can say that it is also a popular defense of the importance of theology and, at the same time, an introduction to it. I enjoyed reading it. And my mind immediately began to go to how I could use this book. Josh has given me a new tool! It is interesting, well written, and excellently illustrated. Josh has succeeded again in giving us a book that is clear, engaging, direct, solid, easy to read, sound, God centered, balanced, humorous—and it even has pictures!”

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—TED SLATER, editor, Boundless.org; Focus on the Family

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DUG DOWN DEEP

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To Emma Grace, Joshua Quinn, and Mary Kate

*Your father loves you very much. One day when you're older
I hope you'll read this book and realize that I wrote it for you.*

*I have no greater hope for each of you
than to see you build your life on Jesus.*

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MY RUMSPRINGA

“We’re all theologians. The question is whether what we know about God is true.”

IT’S STRANGE TO SEE an Amish girl drunk. The pairing of a bonnet and a can of beer is awkward. If she were stumbling along with a jug of moonshine, it would at least match her long, dowdy dress. But right now she can’t worry about that. She is flat-out wasted.

Welcome to *rumspringa*.

The Amish, people who belong to a Christian religious sect with roots in Europe, practice a radical form of separation from the modern world. They live and dress with simplicity. Amish women wear bonnets and long, old-fashioned dresses and never touch makeup. The men wear wide-rimmed straw hats, sport bowl cuts, and grow chin curtains—full beards with the mustaches shaved off.

My wife, Shannon, sometimes says she wants to be Amish, but I know this isn’t true. Shannon entertains her Amish fantasy when life feels too

complicated or when she's tired of doing laundry. She thinks life would be easier if she had only two dresses to choose from and both looked the same. I tell her that if she ever tried to be Amish, she would buy a pair of jeans and ditch her head covering about ten minutes into the experiment. Besides, she would never let me grow a beard like that.

Once Shannon and her girlfriend Shelley drove to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for a weekend of furniture and quilt shopping in Amish country. They stayed at a bed-and-breakfast located next door to an Amish farm. One morning Shannon struck up a conversation with the inn's owner, who had lived among the Amish his entire life. She asked him questions, hoping for romantic details about the simple, buggy-driven life. But instead he complained about having to pick up beer cans every weekend.

Beer cans?

"Yes," he said, "the Amish kids leave them everywhere." That's when he told her about rumspringa. The Amish believe that before a young person chooses to commit to the Amish church as an adult, he or she should have the chance to freely explore the forbidden delights of the outside world. So at age sixteen everything changes for Amish teenagers. They go from milking cows and singing hymns to living like debauched rock stars.

In the Pennsylvania Dutch language, *rumspringa* literally means "running around." It's a season of doing anything and everything you want with zero rules. During this time—which can last from a few months to several years—all the restrictions of the Amish church are lifted. Teens are free to shop at malls, have sex, wear makeup, play video games, do drugs, use cell phones, dress however they want, and buy and drive cars. But what they seem to enjoy most during rumspringa is gathering at someone's barn, blasting music, and then drinking themselves into the ground. Every weekend, the man told Shannon, he had to clean up beer cans littered around his property following the raucous, all-night Amish parties.

When Shannon came home from her Lancaster weekend, her Amish aspirations had diminished considerably. The picture of cute little Amish girls binge drinking took the sheen off her idealistic vision of Amish life. We completed her disillusionment when we rented a documentary about the rite of rumspringa called *Devil's Playground*. Filmmaker Lucy Walker spent three years befriending, interviewing, and filming Amish teens as they explored the outside world. That's where we saw the drunk Amish girl tripping along at a barn party. We learned that most girls continue to dress Amish even as they party—as though their clothes are a lifeline back to safety while they explore life on the wild side.

In the documentary Faron, an outgoing, skinny eighteen-year-old sells and is addicted to the drug crystal meth. After Faron is busted by the cops, he turns in rival drug dealers. When his life is threatened, Faron moves back to his parents' home and tries to start over. The Amish faith is a good religion, he says. He wants to be Amish, but his old habits keep tugging on him.

A girl named Velda struggles with depression. During rumspringa she finds the partying empty, but after joining the church she can't imagine living the rest of her life as an Amish woman. "God talks to me in one ear, Satan in the other," Velda says. "Part of me wants to be my like my parents, but the other part wants the jeans, the haircut, to do what I want to do."¹ When she fails to convince her Amish fiancé to leave the church with her, she breaks off her engagement a month before the wedding and leaves the Amish faith for good. As a result Velda is shunned by her family and the entire community. Alone but determined, she begins to attend college.

Velda's story is the exception. Eighty to 90 percent of Amish teens decide to return to the Amish church after rumspringa.² At one point in the film, Faron insightfully comments that rumspringa is like a vaccination for Amish

teens. They binge on all the worst aspects of the modern world long enough to make themselves sick of it. Then, weary and disgusted, they turn back to the comforting, familiar, and safe world of Amish life.

But as I watched, I wondered, *What are they really going back to? Are they choosing God or just a safe and simple way of life?*

I know what it means to wrestle with questions of faith. I know what it's like for faith to be so mixed up with family tradition that it's hard to distinguish between a genuine knowledge of God and comfort in a familiar way of life.

I grew up in an evangelical Christian family. One that was on the more conservative end of the spectrum. I'm the oldest of seven children. Our parents homeschooled us, raised us without television, and believed that old-fashioned courtship was better than modern dating. Friends in our neighborhood probably thought our family was Amish, but that's only because they didn't know some of the really conservative Christian homeschool families. The truth was that our family was more culturally liberal than many homeschoolers. We watched movies, could listen to rock music (as long as it was Christian or the Beatles), and were allowed to have Star Wars and Transformers toys.

But even so, during high school I bucked my parents' restrictions. That's not to say my spiritual waywardness was very shocking. I doubt Amish kids would be impressed by my teenage dabbling in worldly pleasure. I never did drugs. Never got drunk. The worst things I ever did were to steal porn magazines, sneak out of the house at night with a kid from church, and date various girls behind my parents' backs. Although my rebellion was tame in comparison, it was never virtue that held me back from sin. It was lack

of opportunity. I shudder to think what I would have done with a parent-sanctioned season of rumspringa.

The bottom line is that my parents' faith wasn't really my faith. I knew how to work the system, I knew the Christian lingo, but my heart wasn't in it. My heart was set on enjoying the moment.

Recently a friend of mine met someone who knew me in early high school. "What did she remember about me?" I asked.

"She said you were girl crazy, full of yourself, and immature," my friend told me.

Yeah, she knew me, I thought. It wasn't nice to hear, but I couldn't argue. I didn't know or fear God. I didn't have any driving desire to know him.

For me, the Christian faith was more about a set of moral standards than belief and trust in Jesus Christ.

During my early twenties I went through a phase of blaming the church I had attended in high school for all my spiritual deficiencies. Evangelical megachurches make good punching bags.

My reasoning went something like this: I was spiritually shallow because the pastors' teaching had been shallow. I wasn't fully engaged because they hadn't done enough to grab my attention. I was a hypocrite because everyone else had been a hypocrite. I didn't know God because they hadn't provided enough programs. Or they hadn't provided the right programs. Or maybe they'd had too many programs.

All I knew was that it was someone else's fault.

Blaming the church for our problems is second only to the popular and easy course of blaming our parents for everything that's wrong with us. But

the older I get, the less I do of both. I hope that's partly due to the wisdom that comes with age. But I'm sure it's also because I am now both a parent and a pastor. Suddenly I have a lot more sympathy for my dad and mom and the pastors at my old church. Funny how that works, isn't it?

At the church where I now pastor (which I love), some young adults remind me of myself when I was in high school. They are church kids who know so much about Christian religion and yet so little about God. Some are passive, completely ambivalent toward spiritual things. Others are actively straying from their faith—ticked off about their parents' authority, bitter over a rule or guideline, and counting the minutes until they turn eighteen and can disappear. Others aren't going anywhere, but they stay just to go through the motions. For them, church is a social group.

It's strange being on the other side now. When I pray for specific young men and women who are wandering from God, when I stand to preach and feel powerless to change a single heart, when I sit and counsel people and it seems nothing I can say will draw them away from sin, I remember the pastors from my teenage years. I realize they must have felt like this too. They must have prayed and cried over me. They must have labored over sermons with students like me in mind.

I see now that they were doing the best they knew how. But a lot of the time, I wasn't listening.

During high school I spent most Sunday sermons doodling, passing notes, checking out girls, and wishing I were two years older and five inches taller so a redhead named Jenny would stop thinking of me as her "little brother." That never happened.

I mostly floated through grown-up church. Like a lot of teenagers in

evangelical churches, I found my sense of identity and community in the parallel universe of the youth ministry. Our youth group was geared to being loud, fast paced, and fun. It was modeled on the massive and influential, seeker-sensitive Willow Creek Community Church located outside Chicago. The goal was simple: put on a show, get kids in the building, and let them see that Christians are cool, thus Jesus is cool. We had to prove that being a Christian is, contrary to popular opinion and even a few annoying passages of the Bible, loads of fun. Admittedly it's not as much fun as partying and having sex but pretty fun nonetheless.

Every Wednesday night our group of four-hundred-plus students divided into teams. We competed against each other in games and won points by bringing guests. As a homeschooler, of course I was completely worthless in the "bring friends from school" category. So I tried to make up for that by working on the drama and video team. My buddy Matt and I wrote, performed, and directed skits to complement our youth pastor's messages. Unfortunately, our idea of complementing was to deliver skits that were not even remotely connected to the message. The fact that Matt was a Brad Pitt look-alike assured that our skits were well received (at least by the girls).

The high point of my youth-group performing career came when the pastor found out I could dance and asked me to do a Michael Jackson impersonation. The album *Bad* had just come out. I bought it, learned all the dance moves, and then when I performed—how do I say this humbly?—I blew everyone away. I *was* bad (and I mean that in the good sense of the word *bad*). The crowd went absolutely nuts. The music pulsed, and girls were screaming and grabbing at me in mock adulation as I moonwalked and lip-synced my way through one of the most inane pop songs ever written. I loved every minute of it.

Looking back, I'm not real proud of that performance. I would feel better about my *bad* moment if the sermon that night had been about the

depravity of man or something else that was even slightly related. But there was no connection. It had nothing to do with anything.

For me, dancing like Michael Jackson that night has come to embody my experience in a big, evangelical, seeker-oriented youth group. It was fun, it was entertaining, it was culturally savvy (at the time), and it had very little to do with God. Sad to say, I spent more time studying Michael's dance moves for that drama assignment than I was ever asked to invest in studying about God.

Of course, this was primarily my own fault. I was doing what I wanted to do. There were other kids in the youth group who were more mature and who grew more spiritually during their youth-group stint. And I don't doubt the good intentions of my youth pastor. He was trying to strike the balance between getting kids to attend and teaching them.

Maybe I wouldn't have been interested in youth group if it hadn't been packaged in fun and games and a good band. But I still wish someone had expected more of me—of all of us.

Would I have listened? I can't know. But I do know that a clear vision of God and the power of his Word and the purpose of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection were lost on me in the midst of all the flash and fun.



There's a story in the Bible of a young king named Josiah, who lived about 640 years before Christ. I think Josiah could have related to me—being religious but ignorant of God. Josiah's generation had lost God's Word. And I don't mean that figuratively. They *literally* lost God's Word. It sounds ridiculous, but they essentially misplaced the Bible.

If you think about it, this was a pretty big deal. We're not talking about

a pair of sunglasses or a set of keys. The Creator of the universe had communicated with mankind through the prophet Moses. He gave his law. He revealed what he was like and what he wanted. He told his people what it meant for them to be his people and how they were to live. All this was dutifully recorded on a scroll. Then this scroll, which was precious beyond measure, was stored in the holy temple. But later it was misplaced. No one knows how. Maybe a clumsy priest dropped it and it rolled into a dark corner.

But here's the really sad thing: nobody noticed it was missing. No search was made. Nobody checked under the couch. It was gone and no one cared. For decades those who wore the label "God's people" actually had no communication with him.

They wore their priestly robes, they carried on their traditions in their beautiful temple, and they taught their messages that were so wise, so insightful, so inspirational.

But it was all a bunch of hot air—nothing but their own opinions. Empty ritual. Their robes were costumes, and their temple was an empty shell.

This story scares me because it shows that it's possible for a whole generation to go happily about the business of religion, all the while having lost a true knowledge of God.



When we talk about knowledge of God, we're talking about theology. Simply put, theology is the study of the nature of God—who he is and how he thinks and acts. But theology isn't high on many people's list of daily concerns.

My friend Curtis says that most people today think only of themselves. He calls this “me-ology.” I guess that’s true. I know it was true of me and still can be. It’s a lot easier to be an expert on what I think and feel and want than to give myself to knowing an invisible, universe-creating God.

Others view theology as something only scholars or pastors should worry about. I used to think that way. I viewed theology as an excuse for all the intellectual types in the world to add homework to Christianity.

But I’ve learned that this isn’t the case. Theology isn’t for a certain group of people. In fact, it’s impossible for anyone to escape theology. It’s everywhere. All of us are constantly “doing” theology. In other words, all of us have some idea or opinion about what God is like. Oprah does theology. The person who says, “I can’t believe in a God who sends people to hell” is doing theology.

We all have some level of knowledge. This knowledge can be much or little, informed or uninformed, true or false, but we all have some concept of God (even if it’s that he doesn’t exist). And we all base our lives on what we think God is like.

So when I was spinning around like Michael Jackson at youth group, I was a theologian. Even though I wasn’t paying attention in church. Even though I wasn’t very concerned with Jesus or pleasing him. Even though I was more preoccupied with my girlfriend and with being popular. Granted I was a really bad theologian—my thoughts about God were unclear and often ignorant. But I had a concept of God that directed how I lived.

I’ve come to learn that theology matters. And it matters not because we want a good grade on a test but because what we know about God shapes the way we think and live. What you believe about God’s nature—what he is like, what he wants from you, and whether or not you will answer to him—affects every part of your life.

Theology matters, because if we get it wrong, then our whole life will be wrong.

I know the idea of “studying” God often rubs people the wrong way. It sounds cold and theoretical, as if God were a frog carcass to dissect in a lab or a set of ideas that we memorize like math proofs.

But studying God doesn't have to be like that. You can study him the way you study a sunset that leaves you speechless. You can study him the way a man studies the wife he passionately loves. Does anyone fault him for noting her every like and dislike? Is it clinical for him to desire to know the thoughts and longings of her heart? Or to want to hear her speak?

Knowledge doesn't have to be dry and lifeless. And when you think about it, exactly what is our alternative? Ignorance? Falsehood?

We're either building our lives on the reality of what God is truly like and what he's about, or we're basing our lives on our own imagination and misconceptions.

We're all theologians. The question is whether what we know about God is true.

In the days of King Josiah, theology was completely messed up. This isn't really surprising. People had lost God's words and then quickly forgot what the true God was like.

King Josiah was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. People call Jeremiah the weeping prophet, and there was a lot to weep about in those

days. “A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land,” Jeremiah said. “The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way” (Jeremiah 5:30–31, NIV).

As people learned to love their lies about God, they lost their ability to recognize his voice. “To whom can I speak and giving warning?” God asked. “Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it” (Jeremiah 6:10, NIV).

People forgot God. They lost their taste for his words. They forgot what he had done for them, what he commanded of them, and what he threatened if they disobeyed. So they started inventing gods for themselves. They started borrowing ideas about God from the pagan cults. Their made-up gods let them live however they wanted. It was “me-ology” masquerading as theology.

The results were not pretty.

Messed-up theology leads to messed-up living. The nation of Judah resembled one of those skanky reality television shows where a houseful of barely dressed singles sleep around, stab each other in the back, and try to win cash. Immorality and injustice were everywhere. The rich trampled the poor. People replaced the worship of God with the worship of pagan deities that demanded religious orgies and child sacrifice. Every level of society, from marriage and the legal system to religion and politics, was corrupt.

The surprising part of Josiah’s story is that in the midst of all the distortion and corruption, he chose to seek and obey God. And he did this as a young man (probably no older than his late teens or early twenties). Scripture gives this description of Josiah: “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2, NIV).

The prophet Jeremiah called people to the same straight path of true theology and humble obedience:

Thus says the LORD:

“Stand by the roads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way is; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

In Jeremiah’s words you see a description of King Josiah’s life. His generation was rushing past him, flooding down the easy paths of man-made religion, injustice, and immorality.

They didn’t stop to look for a different path.

They didn’t pause to consider where the easy path ended.

They didn’t ask if there was a better way.

But Josiah stopped. He stood at a crossroads, and he looked. And then he asked for something that an entire generation had neglected, even completely forgotten. He asked for the ancient paths.

What are the ancient paths? When the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah used the phrase, he was describing obedience to the Law of Moses. But today the ancient paths have been transformed by the coming of Jesus Christ. Now we see that those ancient paths ultimately led to Jesus. We have not only truth to obey but a person to trust in—a person who perfectly obeyed the Law and who died on the cross in our place.

But just as in the days of Jeremiah, the ancient paths still represent life based on a true knowledge of God—a God who is holy, a God who is just, a God who is full of mercy toward sinners. Walking in the ancient paths still means relating to God on his terms. It still means receiving and obeying his self-revelation with humility and awe.

Just as he did with Josiah and Jeremiah and every generation after them, God calls us to the ancient paths. He beckons us to return to theology that is true. He calls us, as Jeremiah called God's people, to recommit ourselves to orthodoxy.

The word *orthodoxy* literally means "right opinion." In the context of Christian faith, orthodoxy is shorthand for getting your opinion or thoughts about God right. It is teaching and beliefs based on the established, proven, cherished truths of the faith. These are the truths that don't budge. They're clearly taught in Scripture and affirmed in the historic creeds of the Christian faith:

There is one God who created all things.

God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Bible is God's inerrant word to humanity.

Jesus is the virgin-born, eternal Son of God.

Jesus died as a substitute for sinners so they could be forgiven.

Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus will one day return to judge the world.

Orthodox beliefs are ones that genuine followers of Jesus have acknowledged from the beginning and then handed down through the ages. Take one of them away, and you're left with something less than historic Christian belief.

When I watched the documentary about the Amish rite of rumspringa, what stood out to me was the way the Amish teenagers processed the decision of whether or not to join the Amish church. With few exceptions the decision

seemed to have very little to do with God. They weren't searching Scripture to see if what their church taught about the world, the human heart, and salvation was true. They weren't wrestling with theology. I'm not implying that the Amish don't have a genuine faith and trust in Jesus. But for the teens in the documentary, the decision was mostly a matter of choosing a culture and a lifestyle. It gave them a sense of belonging. In some cases it gave them a steady job or allowed them to marry the person they wanted.

I wonder how many evangelical church kids are like the Amish in this regard. Many of us are not theologically informed. Truth about God doesn't define us and shape us. We have grown up in our own religious culture. And often this culture, with its own rituals and music and moral values, comes to represent Christianity far more than specific beliefs about God do.

Every new generation of Christians has to ask the question, what are we actually choosing when we choose to be Christians? Watching the stories of the Amish teenagers helped me realize that a return to orthodoxy has to be more than a return to a way of life or to cherished traditions. Of course the Christian faith leads to living in specific ways. And it does join us to a specific community. And it does involve tradition. All this is good. It's important. But it has to be more than tradition. It has to be about a person—the historical and living person of Jesus Christ.

Orthodoxy matters because the Christian faith is not just a cultural tradition or moral code. Orthodoxy is the irreducible truths about God and his work in the world. Our faith is not just a state of mind, a mystical experience, or concepts on a page. Theology, doctrine, and orthodoxy matter because God is real, and he has acted in our world, and his actions have meaning today and for all eternity.

For many people, words like *theology*, *doctrine*, and *orthodoxy* are almost completely meaningless. Maybe they're unappealing, even repellent.

Theology sounds stuffy.

Doctrine is something unkind people fight over.

And orthodoxy? Many Christians would have trouble saying what it is other than it calls to mind images of musty churches guarded by old men with comb-overs who hush and scold.

I can relate to that perspective. I've been there. But I've also discovered that my prejudice, my "theology allergy," was unfounded.

This book is the story of how I first glimpsed the beauty of Christian theology. These pages hold the journal entries of my own spiritual journey—a journey that led to the realization that sound doctrine is at the center of loving Jesus with passion and authenticity. I want to share how I learned that orthodoxy isn't just for old men but is for anyone who longs to behold a God who is bigger and more real and glorious than the human mind can imagine.

The irony of my story—and I suppose it often works this way—is that the very things I needed, even longed for in my relationship with God, were wrapped up in the very things I was so sure could do me no good. I didn't understand that such seemingly worn-out words as *theology*, *doctrine*, and *orthodoxy* were the pathway to the mysterious, awe-filled experience of truly knowing the living Jesus Christ.

They told the story of the Person I longed to know.