Series: The Case for Christ

Message: Investigating the Case for Christ

Text: Acts 8:26-29

Theme:

Date: April 30, 2017

Location: Christ Community EFC

**[Play Sermon 1 Video Bumper]**

I’d like to welcome you to this, the first week of our four-week series on The Case for Christ.

You may have seen the movie or read the book by that title, in which we see a young atheist named Lee Strobel investigating the claims of Christianity—but not with the desire to find or follow Christ!

Rather, he wanted to establish the case **against** Christ, with the hope of “rescuing” his wife, Leslie, from her newfound faith in Jesus.

In the process he read, researched, and talked to numerous experts, all in the age before the Internet.

This turned into an almost two-year spiritual journey for Strobel, with lots of setbacks and challenges along the way.

This morning we are going to be talking about the question of how **we**, too, **can investigate the evidence for Christ**.

But before we do, let’s watch a short clip from the movie.

In this clip, it shows a very frustrated Lee Strobel sitting in the newsroom of the Chicago Tribune, trying to figure out what to do with all of the evidence he was uncovering that was consistently pointing him toward the truth of the Christian faith.

Then, in the middle of his contemplative moment, Strobel’s coworker Kenny London, the Tribune’s religion editor, walks in and senses the situation, and how he might help. Let’s take a look.

**[Play Video 1: Investigating the Case for Christ]**

Have you ever been in a conversation like that?

Have you ever sensed, as Kenny London did in that scene, that a friend or family member has at least some degree of interest in investigating the evidence for Christ but is hung up on a **spiritual sticking point**?

Or maybe you’re at a place in your own life where you’re dealing with your **own spiritual sticking point**.

What do I mean by a spiritual sticking point? I’m glad you asked.

**If you would, please turn in your Bible to Acts chapter 8.**

We find a biblical example of a spiritual sticking point here in **Acts chapter 8, starting in verse 26**.

Acts chapter 7 ends with the first **martyr, Stephen** who was stoned to death for his faith in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 8 describes how, because of the rise of persecution against the early church, the early Christians began to speed out leaving Jerusalem and as they went **they took the gospel message with them**.

One of these early Christians who left Jerusalem was named Philip. **Philip first went to Samaria**.

Then here in Acts 8:26 God spoke through an angel to present Philip with a very unusual request.

We read in Acts 8:26 “**Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza**.”

The angle didn’t explain why, but Philip obeyed anyway.

So Philip started out, and he saw a carriage coming down the road. And in the carriage was an Ethiopian official, basically the equivalent of the Secretary of the Treasury, for the queen of Ethiopia.

He was a eunuch. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning.

And according to verse 28, he was seated in his carriage and was reading aloud from the Old Testament Scriptures, from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

In verse 29 we read that “…[Holy] **Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot**.”

And as Philip approached, he heard the Ethiopian reading from Isaiah.

So we pick up in Acts 8:30–31: “**So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him**.”

In other words, this man from Ethiopia had hit a spiritual sticking point.

He was on a journey, literally, coming back from worshiping in Jerusalem. So he was on a **physical journey**, but he was on a **spiritual journey** as well, trying to understand the Scriptures.

But he has reached a sticking point: He can’t understand it without someone helping him along.

Often this happens with people who are feeling attracted toward God.

They’re on a journey toward God, but they hit a **sticking point**—**something that blocks** their spiritual journey.

There’s an issue, an objection, a question, a concern that blocks their progress toward a spiritual breakthrough.

Have you ever felt that way? You hunger for a deep, authentic personal relationship with Christ, but something stunts your spiritual progress?

You’re attracted to a relationship with the God of the universe, but there’s something you can’t seem to get past? You’re not alone!

Today we are going to talk about **four of the most common spiritual sticking points** that come up when investigating the Case for Christ.

Maybe one of these sticking points is yours and this will be helpful to you on your own spiritual journey or for someone you know.

**Spiritual Sticking Point #1: I Can’t Believe**

The first sticking point is when we say, **“I can’t believe.”**

This struggle is often expressed by people with intellectual issues blocking their spiritual path.

They have a question or an objection that is stopping them in their journey toward God.

A scientist might say, “I can’t believe the Bible because it conflicts with science.”

Or the mother of a sick child could be heard saying, “I can't believe in a God who permits my precious girl to suffer when so many evil people thrive.”

Or maybe it’s a lawyer who says, “I’m used to dealing with evidence, facts, data, and logic; I can’t believe in something we’re asked to accept on faith.”

A businessperson might explain, “I prayed my business would succeed, but it’s going down the tubes. I can’t believe in a God who ignores my prayers.”

This is the sticking point that Jesus’ disciple Thomas had.

We hear it in John 20:25 where Thomas said, “**Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe**.”

So how can we get past this spiritual sticking point?

We can learn from the Ethiopian eunuch that Philip met on the road.

You know what he was doing? He was actively seeking God.

The Ethiopian went to the temple in Jerusalem to worship, even though under Jewish law he was not allowed to fully participate.

And when Philip met him, the Ethiopian was searching the Scriptures for answers. When we do these things, God promises to meet us.

Jeremiah 29:13 promises, “**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart**.”

That happened to Viggo Olsen, one of the first Christians to serve in the country of Bangladesh.

Olsen was a brilliant surgeon, and at one time he and his wife, Joan, were skeptics who struggled with the “I can’t believe” sticking point.

They couldn’t believe in God because they thought modern science proved that the Bible was based on mythology.

But they didn’t let skepticism stop them cold in their tracks; instead, they let curiosity propel them toward the truth.

They sought answers wholeheartedly. They began to investigate their questions like, “Does science disprove Christianity? Is Jesus’ resurrection true?”

As Olsen committed himself to pursuing these questions, he came to the same conclusion that so many others have—the story of Jesus is true.

And advances in many areas of science point powerfully and persuasively toward a Creator who looks a lot like the God of the Bible.

After writing The Case for Christ, Lee Strobel went on to write a whole series of books; The Case for…Faith, Creation, Grace…

In his book The Case for Faith, Strobel quoted a scientist named James Tour, head of the Nanoscience Center at Rice University, who said:

“I build molecules for a living. I can’t begin to tell you how difficult that job is. I stand in awe of God because of what he has done through his creation. My faith has been increased through my research. Only a rookie who knows nothing about science would say science takes away from faith. If you really study science, it will bring you closer to God.”

Sir Lionel Luckhoo was another skeptic who searched for and found truth in God.

Luckhoo was the greatest attorney who ever lived. He was in the Guinness Book of World Records for winning more murder trials than anyone had ever won in history.

He was a brilliant legal mind and received many honors. He was a skeptic, but he took his monumental legal knowledge and applied it to investigating the historical record of Jesus’ resurrection.

In summary of his conclusion, Luckhoo stated, “I say unequivocally that the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt.”

It was both scientific and historical evidence that led Viggo Olsen and his wife to become Christians.

They wrote about their journey in a book called *The Agnostic Who Dared to Search.* In it, Olsen said he and his wife had to take the risk of discovering the truth.

After they did, and after they had committed their lives to Christ, they prayed an unusual prayer, asking God to send them to a place with no doctors and no Christians.

God answered that prayer, and they moved to Bangladesh. During their thirty-three years there, they founded a hospital where countless people found healing and hope.

They also helped start 120 churches in Bangladesh. Was it hard? Of course it was.

But in an interview with Lee Strobel in The Case for a Creator, Olsen declared, “We wouldn’t have missed it for the world. In my opinion, finding the purpose for which God made you—whatever it may be—and then fully pursuing it is simply the very best way to live.”

Friends, if your spiritual sticking point is that you can’t believe, I encourage you to seek God wholeheartedly like Viggo Olsen did, and like Lee Strobel eventually did in the movie.

As you do, take comfort in knowing that God isn’t playing hide-and-seek. In fact, the Bible says the very fact that you are able to seek God is because he is drawing you to himself.

God seeks you first.

It was no accident that Philip ended up on that road with the Ethiopian eunuch—God supernaturally sent Philip.

And I believe it is no accident that you are here today.

Before I go to my next point, let me mention a few great ways **you** can continue investigating the Case for Christ, whether you’re just considering the Christian faith or you’re a believer who wants to grow deeper in your knowledge of the evidence that backs up your faith.

First, **keep coming back** as we go through this four-part Sunday series on The Case for Christ.

Next week, **we’ll explore some of the actual evidence** for Christ and his identity as the Son of God, including the claim that he rose from the dead.

And certainly go see the movie if you haven’t done so already. It is still showing in Wooster.

In addition, I’d urge you to join us here on Wednesday evening at 7pm where we will go deeper into this together.

**Spiritual Sticking Point #2: I Don’t Want to Believe**

Some people’s sticking point is that they can’t believe.

Our second sticking point to discuss today is: **“I don’t want to believe.”**

Now, few people will come right out and admit this, but this is a spiritual sticking point that stops a lot of people.

Have you ever talked with someone who just wasn’t interested in hearing the evidence for God?

Maybe you’ve offered to explain to them how you’ve discovered the truth and the reasons that convinced you, but they just don’t want to hear it.

They don’t think there could be any real evidence—subject closed.

At first this may seem to be an intellectual sticking point—and in some cases it may be.

But sometimes, as you get to know the person, you’ll discover that there is another issue behind their rejection of the evidence.

**Moral issues** often get in the way of a person’s spiritual journey.

They may be involved in an adulterous relationship, unethical business practice, or other sin.

Sometimes people reject the evidence as a way to hide their real concern that **becoming a Christian would mean a radical life change** that they’re just not open to.

In other words, sometimes we love our sin more than we love the truth.

Jesus says in John 3:19 that “…**the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil**.

For people who struggle with this issue of not wanting to believe, their true spiritual sticking point is not a knowledge problem; **it’s a lifestyle problem.**

Again, most people won’t admit that they just don’t want to believe, and sometimes people are unaware that this is their real issue.

Only a few are up front about it. One of those was the well-known atheist Aldous Huxley.

In his book Ends and Means, Huxley made the following admission. He said,

“I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. . . . For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. *We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom*. (emphasis added)

Truth be told, this is the way many people are. They don’t want God to change their lives, so they manufacture reasons not to believe.

But I wish these people would put God to the test. **I wish they’d compare the costs and benefits of their current lifestyle with that of following Christ.**

He offers so much: forgiveness, adventure, a clean conscience, security, guidance, hope, fulfillment, relationship, comfort, peace of mind, love, release from guilt, the power to overcome self-destructive impulses, and the promise of eternity.

Is this second spiritual sticking point one you struggle with? Are lifestyle issues holding you back? Then weigh it out.

Play things out to their logical ends; mentally carry the current trajectory of your life to its conclusion. Where do you end up? And how will you feel about yourself?

Then compare it to the trajectory of following Jesus Christ. As for me, I agree with Viggo Olsen that nothing beats living for the purpose God uniquely has for you.

The sticking point of “I don’t want to believe”, for some people it may be a lifestyle issue.

But other people, they may have a different kind of hidden obstacle: **the fear of intimacy.**

They aren’t afraid of Christ changing their life; their unspoken fear is of intimacy.

They feel attracted toward God, but they recoil from the prospect of relating to anybody on a deep level.

They have a superficial relationship with their spouse and shallow relationships with their kids.

They have numerous acquaintances but no real friends.

And since the core of Christianity is a deep and dynamic relationship with Christ, these people find all kinds of excuses to say it’s just not for them.

You may not even realize that a fear of intimacy is driving you to fend off Christianity, but here’s a clue: **If you have a tendency to keep people at arm’s length, maybe this has something to do with why you’re keeping God at arm’s length**.

But, again, isn’t it worth overcoming the problem rather than missing a friendship with God?

One other variation of this spiritual sticking point is **a hidden authority obstacle**.

A person who struggles with this doesn’t want anyone—including the God who created them—to tell them how to live their life.

So they find reasons not to believe.

But they’re missing the point: God’s goal isn’t to boss us around, but to guide us into our greatest purpose and potential and to protect us from our own self-destructive behavior.

Isn’t that the kind of loving authority we all need in our lives?

**Spiritual Sticking Point #3: I Don’t Know What to Believe**

We’ve seen that some people say, “I can’t believe.” For others, the real issue is, “I don’t want to believe.”

And now, third, some say, **“I don’t know what to believe.”**

Again, let’s go back to the Ethiopian eunuch. This was his sticking point when he invited Philip into the carriage and asked him about Isaiah 53.

This was a prophecy foretelling the suffering of the Messiah, written hundreds of years before Christ.

Look back at our text in Acts 8:34-35 “**And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”**

**35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus**.”

So Philip clarified what the Bible was teaching.

Today, people get confused because they hear all kinds of interpretations of the Bible. They see different denominations.

They hear some people who take the Bible literally and some who say it’s just a general moral guideline. They hear people using the Bible to support contradictory positions.

They try reading the Bible and get bogged down, for me it was when I was twelve years old. I made it to Numbers before I gave up.

So, like I did, they throw up their hands and say, “I don’t know what to believe. It seems like the meaning of the Bible changes according to who interprets it. So who is right?”

If that’s your sticking point, it’s important to know that the key to accurately understanding the Bible is the same as the key to understanding any communication—you must study to determine what the writer actually meant.

Not what we want it to say; not to interpret it for our benefit; not to read our biases into it—but to figure out what the writer intended to communicate.

This is important because sometimes we let what we want the Bible to say to get in the way of what it’s really saying.

For example, suppose you let your sixteen-year-old daughter and friends go to a popular hangout and you say: “You must be home before 11:00.”

How would you interpret that? It seems pretty obvious, doesn’t it?

But what if it gets to be about a quarter to 11:00, and they’re having a great time and they don’t want to end their evening?

Suddenly they begin to have difficulty interpreting your instructions.

They say, “What did he really mean when he said, ‘You must be home before 11:00’? Did he literally mean us, or was he talking about you in a general sense, like people in general?

Was he saying, in effect, ‘As a general rule, people must be home before 11:00’? Or was he just making the observation that, ‘Generally, people are in their homes before 11:00’? I mean, he wasn’t very clear, was he?

“And what did he mean by, ‘You must be home before 11:00’? He didn’t explain whose home. It could be anybody’s home.

Maybe he meant it figuratively—you know the old saying, ‘Home is where the heart is.’ My heart is here, so doesn’t that mean I’m already home?

“And what did he really mean when he said, ‘You must be home before 11:00’? Did he mean literally? Besides, he never specified 11:00 p.m. or 11:00 a.m.

And he wasn’t really clear on whether he was talking about Central Time or Pacific. It’s still only 7:45 in California.

And when you think about it, it’s always before 11:00. Whatever time it is, it’s always before the next 11:00.

“So with all these ambiguities, we can’t really be sure what he meant at all. And if he can’t make himself clear, we certainly can’t be held responsible for following his instructions.”

See how our motives can radically color the way we interpret things?

And people do that with the Bible to get around teachings they don’t agree with or don’t want to apply to their lives.

Clear statements in the Bible suddenly become very murky when we’re looking for ways to avoid them.

But the way to read the Bible is to ask, “What did the communicator intend for me to understand?”

Granted, there are difficult sections of the Bible, and well-intentioned people can legitimately debate the finer points.

But when it comes to the critical central message of what you and I need to know the most, there’s **no** ambiguity.

One verse sums it up: Romans 6:23 says, “**For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**.”

You don’t have to know everything about the Bible to know something.

And that verse is clear about the central truth you need to know. There’s no ambiguity or confusion about it.

**Spiritual Sticking Point #4: I Do Believe; Isn’t That Enough?**

And that brings us to the fourth spiritual sticking point: **“I do believe; isn’t that enough?”**

These people say, “I understand the gospel, and I believe it’s true. But I still feel like I’m at a sticking point.

I feel like something is holding me back from experiencing the kind of relationship with God that people talk about around here.

Why does God seem to be distant from me? Why can’t I really connect with God?”

That’s because merely agreeing with the gospel isn’t enough.

It’s not enough to just understand.

James 2:19 says, “**You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder**.”

It’s not enough just to nod our heads in intellectual agreement.

John 1:12 tells us, “**As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name**” (NASB).

Believing is the first step, but we must also receive!

Romans 6:23 says that eternal life is a free gift—but think about a Christmas gift. It doesn’t become yours until you reach out and receive it.

Otherwise, it sits unclaimed and unopened under the tree.

There’s a simple spiritual equation that flows out of John 1:12: Believe + Receive = Become.

We can’t become true children of God without both elements—we must believe in him intellectually, and we must receive his forgiveness and leadership personally.

That’s what the Ethiopian eunuch did. He learned the meaning of the Scripture passage he was reading—he believed.

But then he received the free gift of salvation by trusting in the promised Messiah, as demonstrated by his being baptized.

The result? He became a child of God and was swept up in the joy of forgiveness and new life in Christ.

The story in Acts concludes with this:

Acts 8:36 “**And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?”**Acts 8:38-39 “**And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.**

**39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing**.

[Phil praying to receive Christ and then being baptized last week!]

Where are you on the journey of investigating the Case for Christ? What obstacles stand in your way?

Now can be the time you get past your sticking points once and for all, if you’ll believe the truth, receive Christ, and become a child of God.

If you want to take that step, pray this with me now:

Father, I don’t know everything about you, but this much I believe: I am a sinner and your Son is my Savior.

I confess the sin in my life and reach out to receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus purchased for me on the cross.

I want to become your beloved child. Thank you for your grace.

Now please fill me with your Holy Spirit, and lead my life from this day forward. Amen.

**Benediction**

**“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” (Num. 6:24-26)**