Book Review: *Forensic Faith* by J. Warner Wallace

By Dan W Reynolds, PhD

In *Forensic Faith: A Homicide Detective Makes the Case for a More Reasonable, Evidential Christian Faith*, author J. Warner Wallace challenges Christians to prepare themselves to defend the faith in an ever more secular culture. As a former atheist and Los Angeles homicide detective, Wallace emphasizes the importance of the use of evidence when sharing and defending our faith. Wallace shows us how to apply detective skills to making the case that the Bible is truth. Wallace shows us how to become case makers for Christ. Wallace also authored *Cold Case Christianity* and *God’s Crime Scene*. This review covers all of the book except the appendices. All quotations are from Wallace unless noted otherwise.

**Foreword by John Stonestreet**

Apologetics is key to witnessing. We Christians have the truth, and we need to be able to defend that fact with all the available evidence in a persuasive way. Stonestreet observes:

Unfortunately, too many Christians have bought into the secular myth that religious truth is in the realm of “belief,” a realm separate and incompatible with evidence and reason, and therefore unknowable in any true sense. This assumes that while we Christians deal with myth, secularists deal with facts. While our deeply held commitments are mere beliefs, their deeply held commitments are based on reality. That sort of thinking has already given up the best thing Christianity has going for it: that it’s true. Actually true. Not true just for those who believe it, not “true for you but not for me.” Christianity is really True. With a capital T. True for everyone, whether they believe it or not. Christianity describes reality as it actually is.

Wallace shares his toolkit for making the case for Christianity. He applies his case-making detective skills to showing why Christianity is true.

**Preface: To Protect and Serve**

Belief must be evidentially based, not just guesswork, hunches, or what feels good. We should know why we are believers. We need to base our beliefs on more than our upbringing or some emotional experience. We should believe Christianity because it is true. We should know the evidence for why Christianity is true for ourselves and for sharing Christ with others. We need to have a forensic faith.

Wallace says the church today is somewhat anti-intellectual, a condition that hurts our efforts to win a skeptical culture to Christ. Many atheists believe that if people can learn the proper way to evaluate evidence, they will reject Christianity. They say most Christians base their beliefs on blind faith and experiences instead of evidence. They believe the evidence favors atheism.

Wallace says Christians who learn to evaluate evidence will conclude that Christianity is true in light of the evidence and will be more persuasive witnesses.

Young people are leaving the church today in record numbers. Most young people who have left the faith say, “they left Christianity because they had intellectual doubt, skepticism, and unanswered questions.” Most college campuses today are hostile to Christianity. Many professors go out of their way in class to deride Christianity. Young Christians who have never heard their professors’ arguments often become disillusioned with their faith in Christ. The church needs to prepare its youth for the coming onslaught in college. Wallace echoes Peter: “…but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who...

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2 The Logos edition of this book was used. The Logos edition does not have page numbers.
Chapter 1: Distinctive Duty

Wallace says we Christians have a choice to make. We can rise to the occasion or shrink back from our responsibility to be Christian case makers. He says to be successful we have to be “all in”; half-hearted efforts won’t prosper. We need to be prepared to defend the gospel to an ever increasingly skeptical culture. We are to love God with all our mind, which means we need to study the scriptures and materials that will help us defend the faith.

Christianity is unique in the value it places on intelligence, reason, and evidence. Wallace says we should be able to present objective evidence for the claims of Christianity. The cornerstone of the veracity of the Christian faith is the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus. Wallace says:

The authority of Jesus is grounded in more than the strength of an idea; it’s established by the verifiability of an event. When Jesus rose from the dead, He established His authority as God, and His resurrection provides us with an important Christian distinctive. The resurrection can be examined for its reliability, and the evidential verifiability of Christianity separates it from every other religious system.

The claims of Jesus were public claims with eyewitnesses. And those witnesses provided written testimonies of what they experienced. The claims of Christianity are verifiable through the reasonable evaluation of evidence.

Wallace says that many things can be used as evidence in a cold case crime: testimonies, behavior of the suspect, physical evidence, biological evidence, statements made or omitted by the suspect, etc. He used the same thinking to evaluate the truth of Christianity. Wallace says it is our duty as Christians to be able to use evidence to support our beliefs when sharing our faith.

Wallace says that during his time as an atheist, most Christians he knew based their confidence in Christianity on subjective experiences. He did not find those experiences very persuasive. He was looking for objective evidence that could withstand scrutiny. When Wallace began to study the scriptures, he was relieved to find that they challenged inquirers to consider evidence and then make a decision once they were fully convinced. Jesus challenged people to believe Him based on the evidence He provided through His miracles. Two good examples of this were Jesus’ responses to the doubts of John the Baptist (Luke 7:21–23) and Thomas (John 20:24–28). Jesus provided evidence when making the case for His deity—we should provide evidence to our unbelieving friends.

One of the reasons the disciples became so bold after the resurrection is that they could preach what they had seen with their own eyes (Acts 10:39–42). We Christians who are alive now have based our faith in part on the eyewitness testimonies of those who met the resurrected Christ. As you read the New Testament, be aware of how the writers based their convictions on what they experienced firsthand.

Many of the disciples of the apostles made the case for Christianity based on the testimonies of the apostles, the testimonies of people who had been healed by Jesus (who were still alive), on how Jesus fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament, on how the moral teachings of Christ were superior to other philosophies of the day, on their answered prayers, etc. Wallace says it is our duty to be case makers for Christ with gentleness and respect. We must “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15b)

Wallace says we need to have a forensic faith, a faith we can defend to unbelievers with evidence and reason. We are not to have an unreasonable faith—“believing in something in spite of the evidence.” Jesus did not call us to this kind of faith. Many unbelievers think that Christians have a blind faith based on wishful thinking without evidence. But Christ insisted that we believe because of the evidence. Wallace recounts some of his faith journey:

When I was an atheist, I believed the universe and everything in it could be explained by (and with) nothing more than space, time, matter, and the laws that govern such things. But I had to ignore the evidence and accept insufficient atheistic explanations for the complex information in the genetic code, the fine-tuning in the universe, the appearance of design in biology, and the existence of nonmaterial minds and mental free agency (more on this in God’s Crime Scene). Despite evidence to the contrary, I continued to trust my naturalistic view of the world was actually true. I believed this in spite of the evidence; I held an unreasonable faith.

Amazing! Wallace now understands that as an atheist he had made an idol out of nature in spite of the evidence.

Wallace points out that basing our beliefs on evidence is not incompatible with having faith because in any

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3 For example: 1 Thess. 5:21; Mark 2:10–11; Matt. 11:2–5; John 20:24–28; 1 Cor. 15:1–8; John 5:36; John 10:25; John 10:37–38; John 14:11; Acts 1:2–3
investigation, even after a good case for a specific explanation can be made, there are always still-unanswered questions. We can have confidence (faith) in our assessment of the evidence even though our knowledge of a situation is not complete. What is important is that we choose the explanation favored by the weight of the evidence. There is an element of faith involved regardless of what worldview we choose. A person should try to make an inference to the best explanation based on the evidence available.

Chapter 2: Targeted Training

The subtitle of this chapter is “5 Steps toward Preparing Yourself to Protect and Serve as a First Responder.” The five steps are: (1) test yourself, (2) raise the bar, (3) arm yourself for battle, (4) involve yourself and hit the streets, and (5) nurture others by demonstrating the nature of Jesus.

God wants us to be deployed into our culture in order to win people to Him. There is no need to train if we are unwilling to deploy. Our commitment should be great enough to mobilize us to action. Wallace says we need to stop teaching and start training. Teaching conveys information, training instructs how to put teaching into practice. Wallace says we have been just teaching for generations and we are losing our young people. Wallace says teaching is good but insufficient; we have to train others to put their knowledge into practice. Teaching imparts knowledge; training prepares us for challenges.

Wallace summarizes his five principles with the acronym TRAIN: T – test, R – require, A – arm, I – involve, and N – nurture. The first principle is Test. Wallace suggests watching debates between atheists and Christians on YouTube. He says to watch the debates where the atheist presents first. Watch the atheist’s presentation, then stop the video and think about how you would respond before listening to the Christian response. Then listen to the Christian’s response. Assess your readiness to engage the secular worldview. Wallace has spoken to Christian youth groups posing as an atheist who has come to share his views. He finds that most Christian youth are unable to give good answers to his objections about Christianity—they are poorly prepared. He then reveals his true identity as a Christian. The relieved students realize their lack of preparedness and are eager to be trained. Wallace says we need to expose the weaknesses of our youth and train them before they go to the university. Wallace has a 21-minute test he suggests Christians take to assess their readiness as Christian case makers.4

The second principle is R–require. It says to “raise the bar and surprise yourself.” Wallace challenges us to set goals and take time for study in order to become a good case maker for Christ. Wallace says we should bring the same dedication to becoming a case maker that we had when preparing for our profession. He recommends preparing to be a case maker in a slow but consistent way. Eventually, you will develop the skills you aspire to.

The third principle is A–arm yourself. Here Wallace says we must make ourselves ready to engage our opponents. We must be able to understand their arguments and have answers to refute them. We need to know how to defend the faith with evidence and have answers for the opposition. Wallace says the way to train is to study the claims of the opposition and be ready to answer them. So, instead of isolating our children from the world, we should train them so they will be inoculated against faulty claims and philosophies. Wallace summarizes:

When was the last time you heard what the opposition had to say? Have you been isolating yourself from opposing worldviews in an effort to live comfortably as a Christian? You’re not doing yourself any favors. It’s time to get inoculated. Don’t avoid the books, videos, or podcasts created by unbelievers. Read what they have to say. Let their claims shake you to the core, if need be, and then begin to investigate their claims with urgency and passion. Remember, the authors of Scripture have invited us to critically examine what they’ve written, using our God-given ability to reason, test, and discern. God’s not afraid of your doubts. He’s raised an army of case makers to help you sort out the truth, and He’s called you to be part of that growing team. You’ll never be able to defend what you believe or help young believers if you haven’t armed yourself with the truth. Get busy; time is short.

The fourth principle is I–“involve yourself and hit the streets.” Wallace says we should schedule when we will share our faith and practice being case makers for Christ. Wallace recommends scheduling street evangelism, sharing Christ with an unbelieving coworker or friend, volunteering to teach a Christian evidences class at church, visiting a local mall to conduct surveys aimed at starting spiritual conversations, etc.

The fifth principle is N–“nurture others by demonstrating the nature of Jesus.” Here Wallace refers us to Peter:

4 The test can be found at http://forensicsfaithbook.com/can-you-pass-the-test/
yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:15–16; ESV)

Wallace says we need to “speak the truth in love” and make our defense with “gentleness and respect.” Wallace says that as we gain confidence as case makers, it will become easier to share respectfully with others.

We should practice our case making to the point it becomes so familiar that we are able to easily share it when under pressure from an opponent. Wallace says we should view each challenge from unbelievers as an opportunity for training. Wallace says that if we want to be effective case makers, then we must dedicate ourselves to regular training.

**Chapter 3: Intensive Investigation**

In this chapter, Wallace advances five investigative practices to use when approaching the historicity of the scriptures. Wallace likens investigating the claims of scripture to investigating a cold case where there are no living witnesses or physical evidence (DNA) but only police reports and eyewitness accounts.

Wallace’s first investigative practice is “read the casebook completely.” Wallace says we must be very familiar with the whole Bible from cover to cover and what it teaches. He suggests reading it repeatedly with a good commentary on hand. He also suggests using online reading plans that arrange the scriptures in chronological order. He says it is important to read verses in context.

The second investigative practice is “think about the nature of evidence broadly” and “think about the evidence for God and the Bible broadly.” Wallace says everything, even seemingly insignificant details, can potentially serve as a piece of evidence. Wallace explains:

> Everything counts as evidence, including the behavior of the people who originally witnessed the life of Jesus, the testimony of those who listened to the statements of these witnesses, the touch-point corroborative evidence of archaeology, the internal confirmation of geography, politics, proper nouns (more on that in a minute), and the deficiency of alternative explanations. These forms of evidence (or something very similar) are used in criminal trials every day. Read the Christian “casebook” with an open mind and broaden your definition of “evidence.”

Wallace says that making a case is often a matter of where the weight of the evidence leads. There may not be any one piece of evidence that makes a case. Instead, numerous facts are best understood by a particular explanation.

The third investigative practice is “take notes and analyze the case thoroughly.” Wallace says when working a cold case, he would organize the case material in ways that helped him understand to whom the evidence was pointing. He discusses “statement analysis” where he sifts the testimonies of witnesses and suspects for “deception indicators.” The words people use will often reveal their inner thinking, feelings, and motives. Wallace says to pay attention to the choice of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and descriptions involving the expansion or contraction of time.

The fourth investigative practice is “summarize and organize the evidence usefully.” Wallace says to make lists of evidence and possible explanations. We should use abductive reasoning (make an inference to the best explanation) to choose the explanation that best fits the data. One makes a cumulative case based on many pieces of evidence, the sum of which point the way. It is the weight of the evidence that makes the case and often not any particular piece of evidence. Wallace used this approach to convince himself that Jesus did indeed claim to be God. While Jesus never flatly stated “I am God,” the statements he did make when taken together leave no room for any conclusion other than Jesus taught he was God. Wallace discusses several of the passages that led him to this conclusion (Matt. 13:41; Luke 12:8–9; John 14:6–9; Matt. 5:18; John 10:25–29; John 10:31–33; John 8:49–58). Wallace says that when making a case, be able to give a detailed expansive version where each piece of the evidence is carefully discussed and weighed and a compact summary version which allows the cumulative weight of all the evidence to be heard quickly and powerfully. Concerning the divinity of Christ, Wallace summarizes:

> Yes, Jesus definitely claimed to be God. He made statements about His divine place of origin, repeatedly telling His listeners that He was not of human origin and that He and God the Father came from the same spiritual kingdom. He made statements about His divine position as He claimed equality with God. He made statements revealing His divine parity, refusing to preface His proclamations the way Old Testament prophets did (with something like, “Thus saith the Lord”) and saying instead, “I tell you the truth.” Jesus also made statements reminding people of His divine power, offering His miracles as proof of His deity, and more importantly, He used the divine title of God Himself, calling Himself the great “I AM.”

The fifth and final investigative practice is “add to the case evidentially.” Here Wallace emphasizes the need for enough evidence to make a case. In making the case for Christianity, Wallace says it is not enough to just use the Bible; we need extrabiblical evidence as well in order to avoid circular reasoning. Wallace mentions several ancient classical accounts of Jesus from non-Christian
sources, most of whom opposed Christianity. Among them were Thallus, Tacitus, Mara Bar-Serapion, Plhegon, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Celsius, and Josephus. All of these writers lived sometime between AD 5 and 180. Wallace also studied the Jewish Talmud. Wallace summarizes what he was able to learn from extrabiblical sources about Jesus:

If every Bible ever printed was destroyed and the only ancient documents we had mentioning Jesus were those written by hostile non-Christians, we’d still know the following: Jesus was a real man who lived in history. He was reportedly born of a virgin and had an earthly father who was a carpenter. He lived in Judea, in the region known as Palestine. He was wise and righteous. His teaching was so influential that He developed a large following of Jewish and Gentile disciples. He taught His disciples to live with the same virtue He exhibited, and His moral code was exceedingly high. But Jesus was more than a moral teacher: He possessed “magical powers” and had the ability to predict the future accurately. His supernatural acts and teachings persuaded many Jews to walk away from their beliefs. Jesus claimed to be God, and His disciples readily accepted this claim. The Jewish leadership ultimately brought charges against Jesus based on His actions and teachings. He was prosecuted and crucified under Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. There was an earthquake and darkness at the point of the execution. Jesus’s followers reported seeing Him resurrected three days after the crucifixion, however, and Jesus even showed them His wounds. His followers believed the resurrection proved Jesus was the Messiah. They adopted Jesus’s moral teaching and lived their lives accordingly, holding to their belief in His deity, even though it meant they would suffer greatly at the hands of the Roman Empire. They were ultimately persecuted for their faith in Christ. That’s a lot of information from ancient non-Christian sources, and it happens to agree with what the Bible says about Jesus.

Wow, that’s a lot of evidence for the historicity of Jesus and the scriptures!

Wallace then argues that the weight of the extrabiblical evidence from science (the universe had a beginning, fine-tuning of physics, the impossibility of abiogenesis, etc.) and ancient non-Christian writers is strongly in favor of the biblical God and Jesus. Wallace tells his readers that people may reject Christianity despite the evidence because of their faulty presuppositions or personal motivations.

Chapter 4: Convincing Communications

The subtitle for this chapter is “5 Principles to Help You Share What You Believe Like a Good Prosecutor.” Wallace says we must do our best to deliver the evidence, then it’s up to our audience.

His first communication principle is “pick a jury insightfully.” Wallace says a trial consists of jury selection, opening statements, evidence presentation, closing arguments, and jury deliberation. He says the most important aspect is jury selection. Wallace says we must select people who are unbiased and open to the truth, people who will consider the evidence fairly and honestly. Jesus was careful in choosing to whom He would reveal Himself and select as disciples. We need to be careful in selecting to whom we will share the evidence for Christianity.

Wallace says there are three characteristics he looks for in people for sharing his faith. These people are passionate to know the truth, unbiased about where the evidence may lead, and are humble (smart but teachable). Wallace categorizes people into four groups: believers who are convinced of their position, believers who have some doubts, unbelievers who have some doubts, and unbelievers who are convinced of their position. For sharing the evidence for Christianity, Wallace says we should target all believers and those unbelievers who have doubts. In so doing, we may strengthen the faith of believers or convince unbelievers. He says unbelievers who are convinced of their position will probably not be open to what we have to say. Wallace says that his strategy for unbelievers who are convinced of their position is to pray and love them until they have some doubts about their atheism. Wallace summarizes:

I make the case to people in all four groups, but once I identify someone is in group 4 [unbeliever convinced of his position], I intensify an important aspect of my approach. I pray for them and continue to love them in spite of our differences. There are people I care for deeply who are still committed members of group 4. I was also a member of this group for most of my life. Only after God removed my enmity was I ready to hear what people had to say about Him. Once I became a Christian, several of my Christian friends and coworkers told me they had been praying for me for years. I remained connected to these people during my years of unbelief because they continued to demonstrate the love of God to me through their actions and words. They never gave up; they loved me unconditionally. Whenever I become frustrated with people in group 4 who are unreceptive to Christianity, I ask myself, “When was the last time I prayed for this person and asked God to remove this hostility? Have I been showing them how much I care about them, or have I been distancing myself from them just because we disagree?” I’ve learned to pray and love my friends and family members who are still part of group 4. I’m watching for God’s activity in
their lives and waiting for an opportunity to be a good Christian case maker.

Wallace’s second communication principle is “instruct your jury evidentially.” Wallace says we need to understand that just because our opposition may be able to make a persuasive case for their position does not prove their position is true. Wallace says he has learned to expect “a strong case from the opposition” but “an argument is not evidence; a presentation is not a refutation.”

Wallace says, “Everything has the potential to be evidence.” In a criminal case, eyewitness testimony is considered direct evidence while everything else is thought of as indirect or circumstantial evidence, including DNA and fingerprints. Wallace says the smallest detail can make a case. He has made cases based on statements alone.

Wallace says that “whoever makes a claim has the burden of proof.” We should ask our opposition to prove that the universe can be explained without God. When talking to our unbelieving friends, instead of just trying to defend Christianity, we should ask them to defend naturalism. Ask them to explain the origin of the universe, the origin of life, free will, the fine tuning of physics, the information in DNA, morality, etc. with only space-time, matter-energy, particles, physical law, forces, and chance. Shift the burden of proof to them; expect more from them. They must show that inanimate matter and physical law are adequate causes to explain the data. When you as a theist are called to defend your position, prayerfully and respectfully do so, but make sure your opposition is held accountable to make the case for their own position as well.

Plausible speculations and theories are not evidence and prove nothing. When making your case, be sure to explain the evidence. Do not use possible explanations as evidence. There may be many possible explanations, but usually one is most consistent with the facts. The idea of a multiverse may sound plausible as an explanation for the fine tuning of physics, but there is not a shred of evidence that the multiverse exists. Ask your atheist friends why they believe in evidentially unsupported things like the multiverse. We must make reasonable inferences to the best explanation based on the available evidence without baseless speculation.

Wallace says we should practice “cumulative case making.” Concisely combining and delivering the best evidences for your case provides a powerful argument for your position. The more data our explanation can explain, the stronger our case will become. Hearing in rapid succession all the evidence that is accounted for by an explanation makes a persuasive argument for a position.

In this way, the weight of the evidence points to the validity of the argument.

Wallace says there are four things he looks for in a reliable eyewitness: (1) they were present at the crime scene, (2) they have no bias that would cause them to lie, (3) their story is corroborated by others or additional evidence, and (4) their story remains consistent over time. Wallace says he applied these principles to the writers of the New Testament. Based on the evidence from scripture and history, Wallace says the New Testament writers pass his test for witness reliability.

Reliable witnesses of the same event will report what they saw from their perspective. Their respective accounts may differ in some ways, but these differences need not be considered contradictions.

Wallace’s third communication principle is “make an opening statement enthusiastically.” Wallace says we should practice making our case for Christianity by ourselves or in front of a small audience consisting of friends who can give us feedback. Wallace says he will drive around listening to tapes of debates between Christians and atheists and then rehearse what he has learned. He says its “one thing to be intellectually capable or academically prepared, but it’s another to confidently and enthusiastically deliver what you’ve prepared for an audience.” Giving a strong “opening statement” makes a powerful first impression that will grab the attention of the audience. Wallace summarizes his advice for opening statements by holding up a colleague named John as an example:

John values his opening statements as perhaps the single most important moment in the trial. His goal is simple: present a memorable, thorough, intellectually robust, and emotionally powerful summary of the case. John hopes to overwhelm the jury with the totality of the evidence. He understands an important principle of jury trials: If you win the jury early, all you have to do is keep them. If you don’t win them early, you’re playing “catch up” for the rest of the trial. Momentum is important in opening statements. That’s why John’s openings are powerful and memorable.

Wallace’s fourth communication principle is “present the evidence powerfully.” We should be interested in our arguments and present them passionately. Wallace says we must be “self-effacing and gracious” being careful to avoid arrogance.

Wallace says we need to become good questioners. He recommends asking unbelievers two key questions: (1) “What do you mean by that?” and (2) “Why do you believe that is true?” He says that those making faulty arguments will: (1) fail to be logical, (2) redefine terms to fit their position, or (3) offer speculations without
evidence. Once we understand where the weaknesses in their arguments lie, we can point out those weaknesses with gentleness and respect. The idea is to point out problems with their position in the least offensive way.

We should communicate in terms that are understandable.

Wallace says we should learn to anticipate possible objections to our position and preemptively address those objections before our opponent brings them up. This requires that we understand our opponent’s position. We should study their objections to Christianity in order to provide them with the best answers.

Wallace’s fifth communication principle is “make a closing argument persuasively.” Once again, we need to summarize the evidence for our case with confidence. We need to confidently yet humbly make our case while respectfully pointing out the weaknesses in our opponent’s arguments. Again, we can point out the factual errors, logical inconsistencies, or bias involved with our opponent’s case.

Wallace likens Christian case makers to “sheepdogs” that protect a flock. Christian case makers can provide security to those confronted with opposing views that may lead them to doubt their faith.

In summary, Wallace challenges Christians to become persuasive case makers for Christ in an increasingly more secular culture. Becoming effective case makers requires commitment, time, effort, dedication, study, practice, endurance, and resolve. By becoming effective case makers, we will help strengthen believers and win unbelievers to the faith.

COMING EVENTS

TASC Zoom Meeting, Thursday, January 14, 7:00 pm EST

Dan Reynolds, PhD will discuss the book Forensic Faith by J. Warner Wallace. Wallace is a former atheist and homicide detective for the Los Angeles Police Department. He shows us how to use evidence to demonstrate that the Bible is true. Logon and get equipped.

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