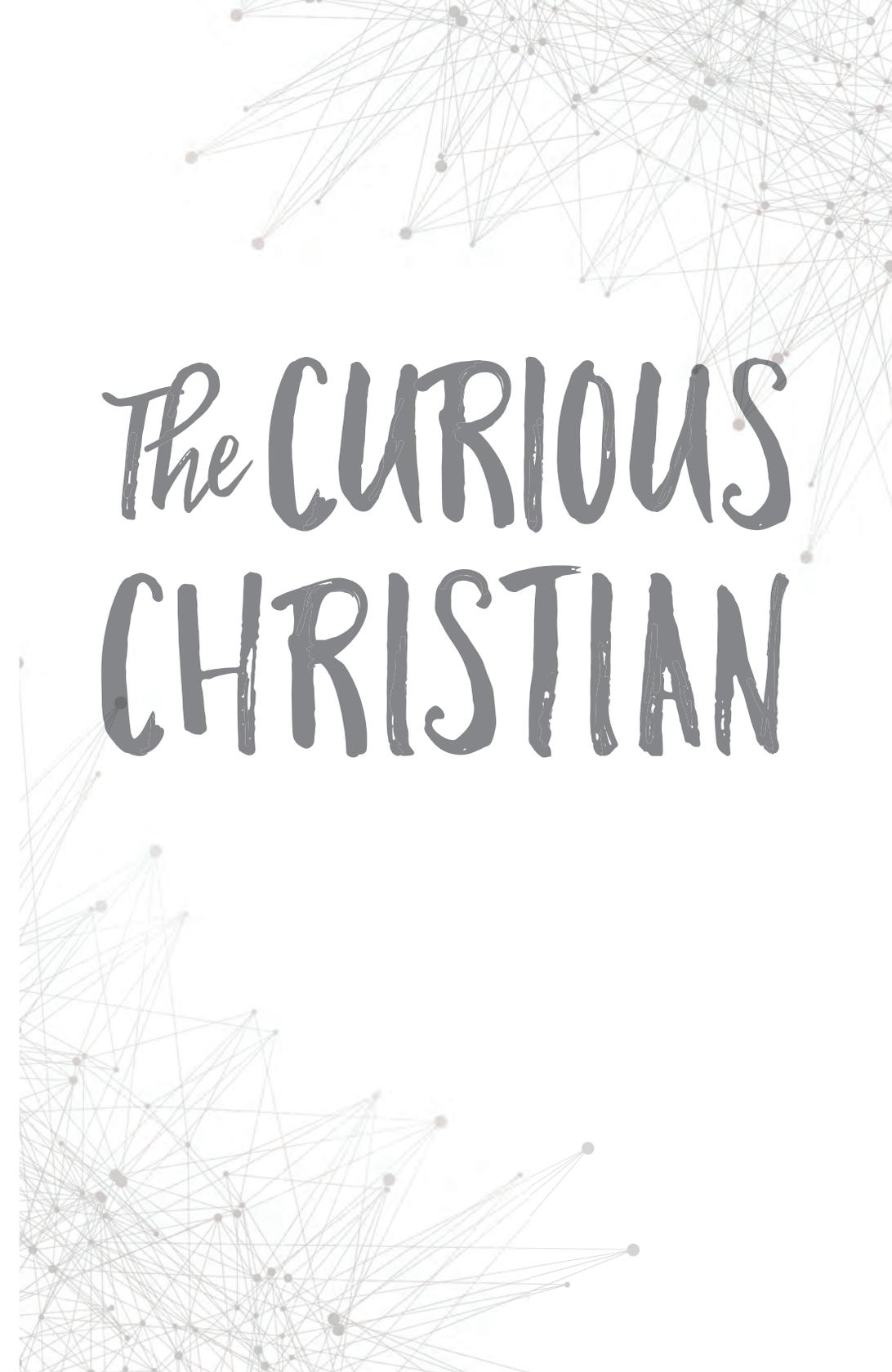


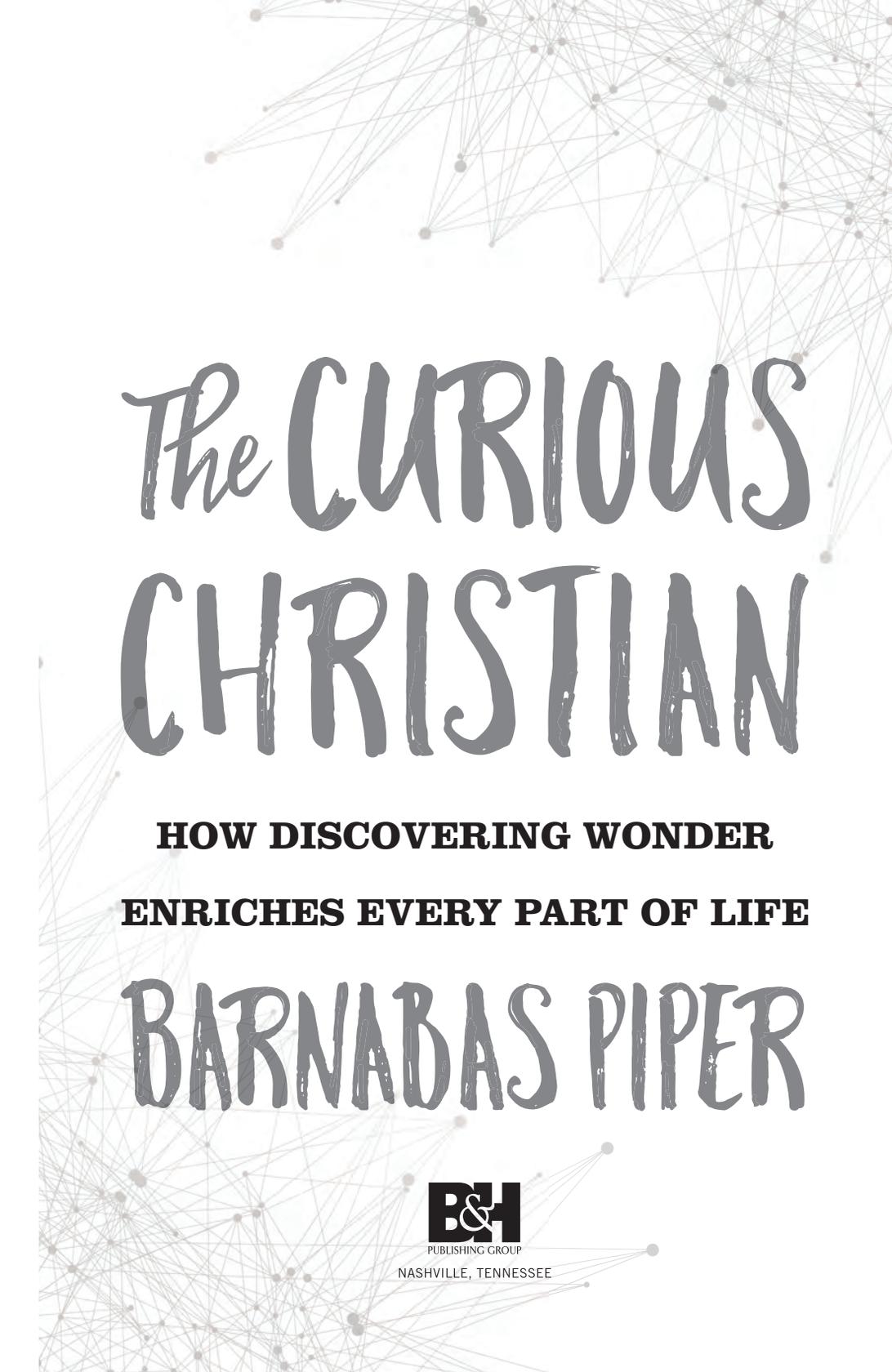
The CURIOUS CHRISTIAN

HOW DISCOVERING WONDER
ENRICHES EVERY PART OF LIFE

BARNABAS PIPER



The **CURIOUS**
CHRISTIAN



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Introduction



HOW RANDOM, A BOOK on curiosity. Is “curiosity” even a thing? Can it actually be defined or described? Is it something people can conscientiously do or respond to? It seems like a trait some people—usually children or weird people—have and others don’t.

If curiosity is a trait received passively at birth, then what is the point of a reading an entire book on something about which you have little control? That’s like reading at length about height or hair color. Curiosity just doesn’t seem like the kind of idea that’s *actionable*, and that’s what most people want in a book—something to read and be told what to do. But curiosity is an actionable concept, and the book you’re holding might surprise you with how much practical wisdom is available to curious Christians.

I’m a curious person. As a curious person, the very questions posed above and others like them are why I think a book on curiosity matters! You may not think of yourself as particularly curious, but don’t sell yourself short. Do you find yourself asking questions often? That’s not a sign of being dumb; it’s a sign of being curious. Do you find yourself

wondering about seemingly random things as you drive down the road or go for a jog? That's not daydreaming; it's curiosity. Do you see little, quirky, odd things about everyday life that others might miss? That's not odd at all; it's curiosity.

For curious people, what appears to be random catches our attention. What we must explore is whether or not it is really random. Or might there be something more under the surface? In almost every case what seems random or odd is not really; there's more to the story that just isn't obvious at first glance. So it is that "randomness" which inspired these pages. Vagueness and intangible ideas captured my mind and moved me to try to order them and give them flesh.

When most people see something that makes little sense to them, instead of engaging it, they cringe, cross the street, and hustle on their way, leaving it for someone else to deal with. They treat ideas or events that "are not really in their wheelhouse" the same way, whether it's art, sports, science, politics, current events, or whatever. Basically, most people avoid most complex ideas and happenings that do not directly relate to their immediate needs or interests. They go about their business living in their narrow view of life.

Going about life in this manner is what I call "uncuriosity," and it has consequences. Severe ones. It dramatically affects how we see the world and all its inhabitants. I unpack these side effects further in chapter 3, but here is a summary.

Side Effects of "Uncuriosity"

Binary Thinking

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who divide everything into two groups and those who don't. Binary thinking

takes the grays of the world and insists they are either black or white. It responds to sensitive and complex situations with either/or thinking and in the end creates far more issues than it resolves.

Missed Connections

Most people in the world are strangers to us. We do not know them and because we do not know them we fear them, for the unknown and the different are scary. Instead of seeing the potential for gaps to be bridged, uncuriosity sees the gaps as protection from the foreign and frightening.

Depleted Friendships

True friendships are among the rarest of commodities. We have buddies and coworkers and neighbors but not so many friends. We lack connection with others because we fear letting them close or digging into their lives. Uncuriosity tells such behavior is risky, messy, and terribly uncomfortable. It is much simpler and neater to leave people in the acquaintance zone.

Love Lost

Marriages are powerful and fragile, and they are incredibly difficult too. Marriage takes remarkable effort because love gives in to the inertia of life. It stalls and stales unless we intentionally, passionately, actively fight to keep it going and living and sparking. Only curiosity will do this because it recognizes the unknown depths of the spouse and the relationship and seeks to learn and love it all. Uncuriosity sits idly by and lets the love grow still, cold, and dead.

God Is . . . ?

Some of us know much of God, but how many of us have a vibrant relationship with God? We know the phrase but not the reality. We know of God but we don't know God. In the same way that friendships never start and marriages fade, we fail to draw close or stay close to God. Because we are uncurious—uncurious about the depths of His goodness and the mysteries of His ways. Our uncuriosity settles for flannel graph depictions of God instead of relentlessly and eagerly seeking to know Him.

I Don't Care

The world is so much larger than us. It holds the lives of seven billion unique image bearers of God from tens of thousands of cultures and millions of subcultures. It is beautiful and terrible and majestic and sublime. And none of this matters to the uncurious because all he can think about is what's for lunch or when new episodes of *Daredevil* will be on Netflix for his binge-watching pleasure. Uncuriosity not only doesn't care. It cannot.

Only curiosity will recognize that what appears complex, complicated, or random and disconnected is, in fact, more connected at a deeper level to things that do matter to us than we've ever considered. What if sports actually are relevant, say, to your interest in family life? Or what if politics is somehow connected to your interest in the arts? What if all of life is a web of truth that connects us to other people and to God? What if the experience we cold-shouldered was the connecting point to a group of people who might bring out the best in us and bless us in untold ways? What if that idea we avoided holds a kernel of truth that might grow into a vibrant concept of God that we've never encountered before?

Only curiosity will lead to such a discovery. Curiosity *is* actionable. In fact, it can be a mind-set we have all the time that feeds and drives all our actions. In the chapters that follow, I will do my best to show how curiosity is one of the most significant ways we have to be image bearers of God, how it can deepen and expand our relationships with others, how it can lead us to an entirely more significant impact on society, and how it will lead us deeper into beautiful relationship with God for all time.

Curiosity leads to discovery of great truth throughout all of life. Without it we tread the same paths to and from work, in and out of relationships, through our churches, across the pages of books and Scripture, all without ever seeing what's really there. We are finite creatures bound by time, space, and mental capacity. But bound or not, we almost never press the limits of those boundaries. Rather we stay safely where we are and miss the wonders God has for us.

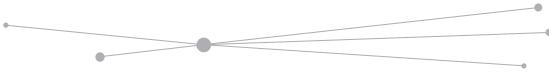
My aim is not simply to persuade you to see the value of curiosity. Doing that would be like persuading you into believing the ocean is majestic or a star-filled Northern Minnesota night sky is beautiful. What difference would that make? These things are true whether you recognize them or not. I might be able to succeed, but would not move you at all. I want to expand your thinking with big ideas, but also leave you with some practical ways to grow in curiosity.

In the end I want you to see that curiosity is more than a mere trait. It is a discipline, a skill, a habit—one that will expand your life in magnificent, if subtle, ways. It isn't a discipline like hygiene or working out that we must do to maintain a decent life. It is so much richer than that! Curiosity is like taking your mind and heart on trips to exotic places to experience things you've never before seen and then returning home to take those we love with us. Curiosity is a lifestyle all its own—a holistic, comprehensive interaction with the world around us and all it holds.

When you finish this book, I want you to have more than *just* a deeper understanding of curiosity. I want you to feel claustrophobic in your current state of life, and to see the expanses of truth you could experience instead. And I want you to go about the business of leading a life that is “curioser and curioser” all the time, with questions leading to answers leading to wonder and even more questions so that the passive, accidental limits you’ve lived by are entirely rearranged or removed all together.

Part 1

To Be Christian Is To Be Curious





Chapter 1

Do Grown-Ups Really Need Curiosity?



“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice.”

“He was a good little monkey and always very curious.”

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

YOU PROBABLY RECOGNIZE AT least one of these lines or stories. And not only do we recognize them, they take us back to a time and place. We can almost hear the voice of our mom, grandpa, or first grade teacher reading to us. We picture where we were sitting as we watched Alice follow the frenetic, worried white rabbit into Wonderland. We hear these words and are transported to childhood.

And that is where curiosity lives for many, in a once-upon-a-time-long-long-ago era. It fits in the time in life when we were turning over stones to look at creepy crawly bugs and exploring every forest like it might be Sherwood resplendent with Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Curiosity is what filled our imaginations once and got us into a fair bit

of trouble too, like that time we picked the lock on our sister's diary, disassembled the toaster, or found the Christmas presents Mom hid at the back of her closet under the old sweaters.

Curiosity is a childish word, but not one that ought to be left in the dusty attic with old teddy bears and G.I. Joes. That very thing that made it a part of the best childhood experiences is what makes it so important now, today, as an adult.

Childlike, Not Childish

The ability to retain a child's view of the world, with at the same time a mature understanding of what it means to retain it, is extremely rare—and a person who has these qualities is likely to be able to contribute something really important to our thinking.¹
—Mortimer J. Adler

Maturity, in the minds of many, means smothering all of childhood with responsibility, ambition, and adulthood. It means being focused, productive, and making a difference in the world. The name Peter Banning won't mean much to most of you until you remember the movie *Hook*, starring the late Robin Williams. Banning, Williams's character, is a hard-driving, successful, fast-talking corporate lawyer who is completely disengaged from his children's lives, especially his son, Jack's. Since the movie came out twenty-five years ago I feel like I can share the ending without a "spoiler alert" warning. Banning is the adult Peter Pan, and a key element of the story is how he must relearn to have *fun* again. After Captain Hook kidnaps his kids, their lives depend on Peter learning how to be a child again. He must relearn how to be Peter Pan. His version of maturity, the inability to laugh and joke and play (and food fight and bangarang and crow), could cost him his children.

Banning is the quintessential American adult, overemphasizing the responsibility of adulthood as the essence of maturity. All things silly, light-hearted, and fun are immature. Maturity means big decisions, fiscal management, and a serious outlook on life. While maturity absolutely means being responsible, I beg to differ about whether that is the whole of it. And I have the apostle Paul and Jesus on my side, so I win.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:11, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things.” It almost reads as if he agrees with that definition of maturity I just gave, but of course we must acknowledge what Jesus had to say too. In Luke 18, Jesus welcomed little children open-armed, even rebuking His disciples who tried to keep them at bay. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me. . . . Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (vv. 16–17).

Are these contradictory views of childhood? Not at all. One suffix makes all the difference—“ish.” As in *childish*. Paul wrote about putting away those things that are childish, immature. Childish, in this case, means simplistic, shallow, and generally stupid. We know this because Paul talks about thinking and reasoning and speaking like a child. He is talking about how children process information and are generally incapable of complex thought and timely, wise speech. As the parent of two young children I can verify that the way children think and speak is far more likely to end up with crayon drawings on the wall, spilled maple syrup, and accusations of being a “poop head” than anything resembling complex problem solving or soul searching.

Jesus, on the other hand, praised that aspect of childlikeness that would humbly, excitedly, wondrously welcome His Kingdom. Think of how children respond to fireworks on the Fourth of July. Their “ooooohs” and “aaaaahs” are the very thing that make explosions in the

sky so enjoyable for parents. Think of how excited they get at finding a frog in the creek and the leaping squealing joy when Grandma and Grandpa come to visit. The wonder and merriment and raw enthusiasm kids bring to otherwise mundane experiences reveal the spirit Jesus praises. This is childlikeness, not childishness.

Paul's and Jesus's teachings are two sides of the same coin, two parts of a whole. Maturity means growing out of those aspects of childhood that are selfish, unaware of others and the world, an excuse for sin. It does not mean leaving behind all aspects of childhood; to do so, in fact, arrests the development of our souls. We must hold fast to those aspects to which Jesus alluded.

Curiosity is one of these. Children bubble over with questions. Why is the sky blue? Why does my ice cream cone melt? Why can't I see God? What makes the car go? When's dinner? And all those might be in the space of a single hour of an evening. It's marvelous, if a bit exhausting.

Children's minds never stop working, leaping from thing to thing, endlessly wondering about the world and all that it contains. That isn't childish; it's childlike. And it's something grown-ups have lost along the way.

All that wonder and curiosity we had as children was our very nature. We didn't so much learn it; we just couldn't help it. Somewhere in the midst of aging and "maturing," nurture defeated nature, locked it in the dungeon of history, and left it to die. It started in junior high when we realized being a bright-eyed question asker wasn't cool, continued through high school and college as certain subjects and objective exams were upheld as the righteous standard of learning, and the dungeon door slammed shut when we started our careers and families because responsibility left no room for questions and wonder. We were taught, tacitly and explicitly, that some subjects and hobbies matter while others are childish diversions.

We sought maturity, and curiosity had no place in the version we saw.

Real Maturity

But what if maturity is not, as I mentioned earlier, the smothering of childhood so that we can dutifully (and often morosely) handle the cares of adulthood? What if maturity handles the responsibilities of life with all the care and gravity they deserve but not at the expense of childlikeness?

Healthy maturity is that which knows *when* and *how* to be child-like. A child might interrupt her parents to blurt out a seemingly random question about fruit flies or bodily functions or Barbie dolls or why the iPad won't work because she's too immature to recognize the discourtesy. A mature adult might have the same question but knows when and how to ask it so as not to disrespect or disrupt others.

Children love fairy tales, adventure stories, mystic lands, and heroic characters that launch their imagination and turn a backyard into Middle Earth, a swing set into Hogwarts, a rocking chair into a TIE fighter, and a bunk bed into a Captain Hook's ship. Every stick is a wand or weapon and every towel a cape. Children embody their heroes in their play and live out the lives of legends. Mature adults love the same stories, are moved by the same heroes, and lose themselves in the same faraway places but without the towel-capes and slat board swords. (I'll leave you, dear reader, to interpret what this might mean for Comic-Con and Cosplay fans.) Many of us call these stories "guilty" pleasures. We indulge them privately and feel a bit sheepish about it.

What if they aren't "guilty" but rather just pleasures? What if the places our imaginations take us are actually right where we ought to be, healthy and rich places for our minds and souls?

C. S. Lewis was one of the most brilliant Christian thinkers and writers of the twentieth century. He knew multiple ancient languages, was an expert in classic literature and mythology, and an Oxford professor. He wrote magisterially on the nature of God and the relationship between God and man and was a devastating Christian apologist. His work is just shy of the biblical canon for many believers to this day. In short, C. S. Lewis was a mature adult, intellectually superior to most, and fruitful to the extreme. He is to be emulated and looked up to in many ways. Lewis had this to say regarding maturity and becoming and adult:

“When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.”²

“The modern view seems to me to involve a false conception of growth. They accuse us of arrested development because we have not lost a taste we had in childhood. But surely arrested development consists not in refusing to lose old things but in failing to add new things? . . . Where I formerly had one pleasure, I now have two.”³

“It is usual to speak in a playfully apologetic tone about one’s adult enjoyment of what are called ‘children’s books.’ I think the convention a silly one. No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty—except, of course, books of information. The only imaginative works we ought to grow out of are those which it would have been better not to have read at all.”⁴

Well now. That paints things in a different light altogether. One of the greatest, most brilliant, most productive Christians in recent history says that we are to somehow, some way, carry childlikeness into adulthood with us! That, friends, is maturity at its best. Any other form is soulless and dull.

Imagination + Information

*Let our teaching be full of ideas. Hitherto it has been stuffed only with facts.*⁵ —Anatole France

We draw the line between imagination and information. We grow out of the former to invest in the latter. We decide that the former has value for life while the latter is mere escapism from life. This, Lewis would argue, is where we go wrong. He would say that the collection of information, the pursuit of knowledge, is not enough without the fostering and feeding of imagination as well.

*Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere.*⁶ —Albert Einstein

*Without leaps of imagination or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all is a form of planning.*⁷ —Gloria Steinem

*Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.*⁸ —John Lennon

Imagination guides and shapes our use of information. If we know all the facts and truths, we are just a static hard drive, a library. Libraries are full of information, stacked high and deep. But what can a library do with all the knowledge it holds? Not a thing. It is a static repository, and that is what we are without imagination. What do we do with information? Where does it apply? How can we do the most good with

it? Who knows? The person with imagination, who values the virtues of great heroes and can envision and form a better story, knows. That person is *curious*.

Curiosity and imagination are conjoined twins. With one comes the other. Imagination continually asks “what if” then envisions the possible answers and lets the mind run with possibilities. Curiosity asks just about anything, and *then* explores the answers and presses to figure it out and see what else there is. It pokes and prods. Curiosity gives flesh to imagination. If information is dead on its own, these are the life force that animates it and moves it to action.

The Spark

Kids need routine, they say. They, being experts, are probably right. Routine reduces anxiety and gives children a sense of security about the shape of life. It offers stability and structure, a well-built life on a firm foundation for little, uncertain minds to learn and grow safely. But children love surprises too. They love the unpredictable and the wild. Adults? Not so much.

Most adults take that routine of childhood and anchor it in a concrete foundation buried deep. We thrive on predictable and we live life as if it all ought to be that way. Isaac Newton declared the every action has an equal and opposite reaction, right? So every action we take should have clear and foreseeable response. We parent this way. We lead our businesses and churches this way. We relate to our spouses and friends this way. We do *everything* as if it should be predictable. In short, we like to live in a rut of consistency. The same stability that creates an environment for children to grow leads adults to stagnate and deteriorate.

But life isn't predictable, is it? People are crazy. Kids are crazy squared. Nature is nuts. Mix in society, politics, religion, family, and

you have a morass of who-knows-what-will-happen-next. How's a mature, levelheaded adult trying to manage life in a reasonable, wise way to survive? *With curiosity.*

Curiosity asks what's next, what now, what if, what about, what's that, who, when, and most especially *why*. It asks and asks and asks in part because it knows a surprise waits and in part because it harkens back to childhood. Children snoop under couch cushions, peek behind dressers, rifle through purses, hide in dark closets, climb trees, poke at ant hills, color on walls, play pranks, and wander off in Target because they just have to know what will happen or what's there. As adults, we see these actions as annoying as often—okay, more often—than we do endearing. But they reveal a spark that every adult needs. Without it, the unpredictability of life will become our enemy and eat us up. With it, we keep growing and developing. Unpredictability becomes opportunity.

*Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while.*⁹ —Steve Jobs

The spark of curiosity might light a fuse that launches you into the halls of academia, the pulpit of a church, or an executive boardroom. It's just as likely to propel you into the laundry room, the car pool lane, or the library. It might take you on a walk in the woods, turn on cartoons, or sit you in front of a pile of Legos. Each one is as valuable as the other and has something unexpected to reveal to you. None is more mature or worthwhile than the others *if* done with that spark of curiosity.

Curiosity seeks the unexpected rather than waiting for it to ambush us. Curiosity produces a proactive life rather than a reactive life. We go on the hunt to discover rather than letting the new and strange come to us, and that is where learning and growth happen. Without curiosity we

grow as stale as the open package of saltines at the back of the pantry, and as musty as the forgotten boxes in your grandmother's attic. We become lifeless in our souls and minds and then useless in our life and purpose.

From here I hope to walk in that spirit of discovery, that curiosity, through the following chapters. I want to examine our own lives, our faith and relationship with God. Then we get to explore our connection to other people, both those we love and those we have yet to meet. Beyond that is the frontier of society and culture; what does curiosity have to show us about that? From there we will turn our eyes to the great beyond of eternity in heaven or hell. How might curiosity prepare us for eternity and even affect us in the next life?

If all this sounds a bit wild, like maybe I've overshot just a bit and should have just left curiosity in the care of The Man with the Yellow Hat, I simply implore you to move forward with me. Bit by bit I'll try to peel back the layers of predictable reality to reveal the wonder underneath that God has hidden there. Not all of it, of course, but hopefully enough to hook you. Let the spark of curiosity you once had flare into life again. You never know what wonderful place it might take you.