

## For those Enquiring about the Christian Faith

Many people say they believe in God and think Jesus was a great teacher. The heart of Christian faith is far more than that, and is worth a closer look. It is what Jesus did as much as what he said that changed the world forever.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He defeated and broke the powers of evil and death. This victory gives us a sure hope that, in Christ, they are overcome for us as well; a hope for all people, and a hope for our troubled, scarred planet. We can experience this hope ourselves, and have confidence in God through faith in Jesus. As a consequence, we are enabled to live a new life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### ***Christian Teaching on this website***

**MANY CHURCHES - ONE FAITH** The Christian teaching on this website aims to be true to what Christians have believed since the time of Jesus. There are many types of church today (called denominations) which have all developed in various ways, with different emphases. On this page I explain the essentials of Christian belief that have united Christians for thousands of years.

**MAKING UP YOUR OWN MIND** Whatever church we belong to, each of us is faced with deciding what we believe. By and large, we make up our minds according to what seems to us to make good sense. However, if God really is our creator, then faith must surely be bigger than our own opinions, and if God is consistent, then He must be the same for people of each generation and throughout the world. Our own opinions and our own 'good sense' must therefore be tested if we are to find the truth.

**A FOUR WAY TEST** A good way of deciding what is true about God is to check out what we believe using these four tests, or standards, often ascribed to the famous evangelist, John Wesley:

- Experience - what you know from life
- Tradition - largely conveyed to us by the Church
- Reason - what makes sense
- Scriptures - the Bible as the Word of God

All of these are important, but the Bible has a special place as the written 'Word of God', and should never be left out.

**EXPERIENCE** Most people agree that whilst our own experience is important, it is best if it is not the guiding principle for what we believe, because very few people would then agree on anything, and our minds would not be challenged to consider different things.

**TRADITION** Christian tradition is vital, because what Jesus did was passed by his disciples to the first Churches, and then on to us; successive Christians learning important lessons on the way.

**REASON** Christian faith must also be reasonable; that is, if God has made our minds, then they must be able to think clearly about Him. Christianity has never had anything to fear from academia or science or any human developments.

**SCRIPTURES** The Bible is especially important to Christians because it is the source of our information about Jesus, and it is the 'Word of God' proved by faith and by generations of Christians. It has played a central role in discovering and interpreting the truth about God, and interpreting it has always been an exciting and important part of Christian life.

### ***Some Questions about Christians and God.***

- **Aren't Christians supposed to be good?** Christian people do not claim to be better than anyone else; however, they do claim that Jesus shows us right and wrong, and strive to live accordingly.
- **Do Christians get an easy life?** No, God doesn't give people a special easy deal because they believe in Him. Christians have as many ups and downs as everyone else, but it is

wonderful to know that God helps us by His Holy Spirit. This can make all the difference at times of trouble.

- **Isn't God dead?** Some say God is dead; by which they mean that we don't need God because we are perfectly able to look after ourselves. This is easy to say if you have the money and material resources to do this, but this is a long way from the experience of most people. God is not an 'idea' we can throw away because we think we are self sufficient!
- **Surely the Church is a mess?** At the moment, this is true! The church does not claim to be perfect, but does try to do what is right, and has always been open to criticism. The church has survived many crises, responding to God's Word and the needs of people in each age. It won't disappear now because of problems today!
- **Why is it all so old?** Many churches are full of old people, and to some, seem stuck in the past. These churches may well die out, but as a matter of fact, there is hardly a village or town in the world where there are not some Christians meeting who are very much alive, made up of real people across the whole community.
- **Why is Christian faith full of words I can't understand?** Every interest group, business, religion or academic subject has its own words which we have to get used to as we learn about them. This, like so many problems, is easy enough to overcome if you talk to other people and have an open mind.
- **How can the Bible be true?** Christians describe the Bible as God's Word. This means that it is special because it is the revelation of God. Over many centuries, Christians have discovered much about what the Bible says and how to apply it within the different societies in which they live. The Bible is a mine of information from which we may find God's truth if we allow His Spirit to help us find it.

## ***God and Creation***

- The Universe is God's perfect creation, made with good intent. What we experience now is not perfect because there is evil in the world. We all know that we can choose between good and evil, and also choose whether we believe in God or not. The two are very much connected.
- Whilst there is much debate about how the Universe came into being, it is much more interesting to ask why. Science does not address this question, but theology ('thinking about God') does. Why are we created and for what purpose, if any? Why is there good and evil in the world? The Bible helps us to answer these questions.
- God made people as different from animals because they have something of God's love within them. This 'likeness' of God is described by the word 'spirit'. Whilst animals think and feel with similar characteristics to people, the human 'spirit' is different. It is conscious of God, of good and evil, and of life and relationships. Our 'spirit' is given to us by God, and makes us unique within creation.
- God made men and women with different characteristics; male and female. However, they are equal in their likeness of God, that is, in their 'spirit'. Relationships between men and women have differed over time, but the Bible is the oldest book to teach that they are equal, and that both reflect the image of God without distinction.
- Evil affects every part of the world in which we live, and it affects each of us in different ways. We can choose to rebel against God and turn away from his ways, or we may simply fail to live up to our best ideals. Sometimes we choose what is wrong, and sometimes it seems as if we are overcome by evil. By definition, evil separates us from God.
- God is constantly seeking to work to overcome all evil and restore what is good. Throughout history He has sought to do this by showing Himself in the lives of individual people (Abraham, Moses) and nations (Israel, Babylonia, Rome). His open offer is to do that within your life and mine.

- In the end, Jesus Christ showed us the way of salvation from all evil through His life and death. It is a universal truth which is both profoundly simple, and profoundly challenging. When He did this, He opened up a way for God to restore all creation to its perfect 'best', in the fullness of time.

## ***Jesus and Salvation***

- Jesus taught us about God and His Kingdom, and He showed this to us by healing people and setting them free from evil. He could do this because He was not evil himself; He was 'sinless'.
- We recognise in what He taught and did, as did his first disciples, that He was special and unique; He was God. However, He did not come just to tell us God's message, but to live it and do good.
- Even though everything Jesus did was motivated by love and showed love, the religious and political authorities of His day saw Him as a threat to their power and had Him institutionally murdered. By so doing, they demonstrated that evil is present in all people, and needs to be actively overcome, even today.
- Astonishingly, Jesus rose to life ('Resurrection') and showed us that evil could be completely defeated. His death therefore provides a way for imperfect people like you and me to return to God, which is through faith in what He has done for us. When we persist in this faith, no evil can separate us from God either now, or when we die.
- This work of Jesus is called 'Salvation'. A Christian is one who accepts that Jesus was God's Son who came to earth to do this. With this faith, a Christian seeks to live in the light of God's gift of being 'saved'; and according to the teaching and example of Jesus.
- After the resurrection, Jesus returned to heaven to be with God. In this sense, Jesus is alive 'in heaven', and Christians talk to Him as one who is spiritually present with them, but also present with God. He is in a unique place to help us
- Because of what Jesus has done for us, we worship Him. We also call Him our 'Saviour'; and because we owe Him our lives, we call Him 'Lord'.

## ***The Holy Spirit and the Christian life***

- When the earthly Jesus left this world (the ascension), He knew we would need His help to live good lives as free from evil as possible.
- Still troubled in this world by evil and sin, we need the help of God's 'Holy Spirit', which Jesus sent to all his disciples after His death, on the first 'Pentecost'. The same Holy Spirit comes today as a 'helper' to all who accept Jesus' saving power.
- The Holy Spirit convicts us of what we do wrong, encourages us in our daily life, challenges us to do right, and enables us to be the people God made us each to be.
- Christians are basically no more perfect than anyone else on earth, but they know they have the help of God's Holy Spirit. Their aim is to do what is right and do what God requires of them. Most, including myself, would claim to be a better person with this spiritual help than without; in other words, we know the value of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
- The Christian life of following Jesus with the help of His Spirit is called discipleship. The Bible teaches that a Christian should aim to be motivated by love, and that living this way leads us on a path of 'sanctification'. This means consciously aiming to be better people, day by day, by God's help. We should not be ashamed to do this, but we should be ashamed to imply that we have finished the journey and are already perfect. Only Jesus is perfect.
- Unfortunately, and often with a false modesty, some people think they can be Christians and miss out 'the Holy Spirit' bit. They are, sadly, most profoundly wrong.

## ***The Christian Church***

- Christians are like anyone else, they are at their best when working for their aims together with others who have similar experiences.
- The Christian Church is the 'congregation' (gathering) of God's people to worship Him, give thanks for Jesus, and, by the Holy Spirit, to do His will.
- Together, in churches, Christian people organise themselves to put their faith into action, organising worship (often including preaching), prayer, Bible study and teaching, and also expressing faith in the world through charitable or political action, and various forms of mission.
- United and in large numbers, God's people can do many things; but too often, ordinary Christians do not see the church as bigger than the people they meet on Sundays, and their ideas about what the Church can achieve is therefore very limited.
- The Christian Church, of any denomination, represents God to the world through its unique proclamation of Jesus and the Good News of the Kingdom of God, and of Salvation. It seeks to put its teaching into practice.
- In a world of many different religious beliefs, the Christian Church has a unique and consistent message about the meaning and purpose of all life, and seeks the freedom to express those beliefs without fear of persecution in any country or culture.
- In the great debates about religion, Christianity is best standing firm on its traditional beliefs. It accepts that people choose to reject its message and whilst it may regret this, it does not seek to sanction, penalise or fight those with whom it disagrees. Such matters lie in God's hands.
- Whilst confident in its heritage and revelation, the Christian Church proclaims God's ultimate authority in all things. We do not know the full extent of His judgements, but we do believe there is full access to God's mercy and love through Jesus Christ.

## ***Our Destiny***

- What happens to us when we die is important to a Christian. We believe we were made for a purpose and that God loves us, and that does not end at our death. When we die, we will face God, our Creator, and He will know all about us, and the lives we have chosen to live.
- Also, the world will end at some time in the future, and although we should be ready for it, we do not know when this will be. When it happens, it is not the end for God or for us, and God will complete His judgement of all.
- In heaven, at our death or at the end of time, God will judge everyone according to His standards of right and wrong. These true standards are all evident within creation, but are not easily seen because they are distorted by evil.
- Those who know Jesus also know that they are not 'good enough' for this ultimate judgement by God. Having done their best to live like Jesus and having faith in Him and His work, they are completely confident in asking God to save them through Jesus' death on the cross. This is sufficient for God to save them through Resurrection, for eternity.
- Those who do not know Jesus, or those who have never understood Him or had His work properly explained, are also judged by God. We do not know His decisions about any individuals.
- Those who reject Jesus, knowing His goodness, His divinity and all He has done for humanity and the world, have made a choice on earth that God accepts in heaven. They have rejected God's way and chosen the way that ends in the annihilation of a death which separates a soul from God, its maker.

When I write about Christian belief, I am not simply seeking to tell you what I have chosen to believe; rather, I am trying to express what I sincerely believe to be the classical Christian Gospel as it has been passed to me. Some of it is hard to understand, yet I trust its heritage. I do believe that our minds and our faith will benefit more from thinking through traditional Christian belief than following current trends to believe what we can relate to and ditch what we can't. No community, of faith or society, can ever be built on such shallow ground.

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