

What is a Christian ?



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Front cover design entitled 'The Cross is the Way' an original altar frontal by Mrs Jean Kirk on display at Putnoe Heights Church.

Introduction

Religion can be confusing and even Christian leaders and churches appear to disagree with each other. If Christians have different understanding of God, does that make Christianity less trustworthy? I do not think so, I hope that variety is to be expected, people disagree about all kinds of things, whether it is football, politics or religion. If we are thinking and working out our ideas, then we will change our minds as we grow. Indeed I find the fact that Christians experience their faith in different ways reassuring. Maturity comes through growth and change. An influential religious figure of the 19th century, Cardinal John Henry Newman, said *“To live is to change, to be perfect is to have changed often.”* The important thing is to listen to one another and recognize that sometimes we will have different points of view, depending on where we are in our own pilgrimage of faith. When we think about God we will do well also to remember the words of a wise Christian who lived in the fourth century, Saint Augustine. He said some very profound things, but I believe that one of his best was this *‘If you can understand it, it is not God.’* What he meant by this was, that if we seriously want to fully understand everything about the God who made the universe, we will be disappointed. Such a God must inevitably be beyond our human comprehension, and so obviously we will have to learn to live without some of the answers. The Apostle Paul acknowledged that often we are groping around for truth in the dark when said ‘we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror’ 1 Cor 13:12.

However despite the things which Christians see differently, the basics of Christian belief have not changed for over two thousand years. There is a central core of belief which Christians agree to be the important basic truths of Christianity. This booklet provides a short introduction for those who are interested to know more about what these basic truths are. It is important to realise however that the Christian faith is not like passing an exam. Christians believe in a living God whom we love with our hearts as well as our minds. Knowing God is more important than knowing *about* God.



Humans have always wanted to reduce God down to our own size. There is just so much we do not understand.

A Pilgrimage

There are things which it is important to understand if you want to call yourself a 'Christian', but actually there are not many! The Christian faith is often described as a pilgrimage. By using the word pilgrimage we recognise that the Christian life is a journey of discovery, learning, growing and changing. Most Christians who look back at their own understanding of God, recognise that their views have changed and grown. This is not a sad reflection, that we didn't get it right in the first place! If we have not moved and changed our ideas, then surely we have not grown or developed. Sadly there are some people who tell everybody else what they should believe about a whole range of issues, from deep theological ideas to practical daily living. Many courses in Christian faith are complete manuals of theology and lifestyle which just happen to coincide with the personal position of the spiritual leader. Once we have understood that nobody has a monopoly on truth, we can recognise that each one of us must have confidence to think, and discover the kind of person that God wants them to be, not be fitted into a religious mould.



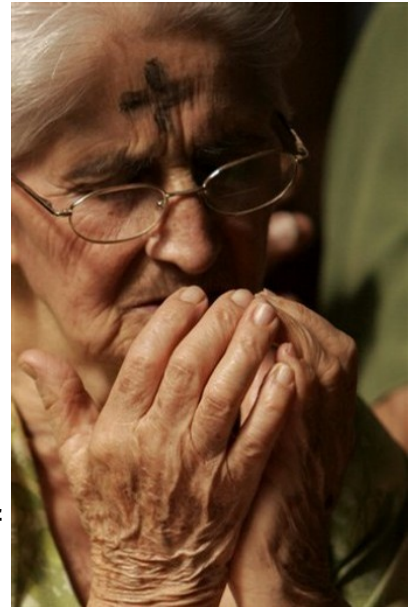
Faith in God does not give us all of the answers, but points us in the right direction.

Why bother with religion?

Christians believe that faith in God answers our most basic human need for life to have meaning. The current trend towards materialism is a blind alley. In our hearts we know that possessions, money, fame, the things which we spend so much of our time chasing, are never adequate to satisfy us in themselves. If we make the mistake of seeking fulfillment in material goods or earthly ambitions, then we are doomed to disappointment and a lack of fulfillment. The stuff with we so easily become preoccupied, promotion, qualifications, materialism, none of these can ever provide that for which we search deep inside our souls. Indeed, the opposite is true, pursuit of happiness in itself is quite selfish and destructive, and unfulfilling. Think of the lives of so many wealthy people who are deeply unhappy and unfulfilled. In a church service on Ash Wednesday in Lent, we symbolically place ash on our forehead. This rather graphically reminds us that in the end 'we are just dust and to dust we will return.' All the things which we desire and surround ourselves with, eventually come to nothing.

This is the paradox of the pursuit of pleasure in which many people are engaged. Ultimately no matter how hard we pursue material goals, we are still left seeking more. Our society today is perhaps dashing about more than ever before, we are rushing backwards and forwards like a plate spinner on a stage trying to achieve some life balance. Yet for all of our activity people are no more happy in their lives. There is in all of us a sort of divine dissatisfaction which points us back to God. That need points to the existence of a God who can satisfy our spiritual desire. This is the theme of the prayer of St. Augustine which speaks about the origin and the goal of human nature. It is one of the best prayers ever written and like many really good prayers it is worth remembering it and taking it to heart —

*'You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in you'*



At Lent Christians remember that all things return to dust. Important things in life are not 'things.'

We are made by God and we experience a deep sense of longing which only God can satisfy. The Psalms in the Bible expressed this.

'As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.' Ps42.

There is a modern hymn written to these words 'Like a deer pants for the water so my soul longs after you.' It is soothing and beautiful, but think of a deer which is exhausted having run through woods, perhaps pursued by wild animals and it eventually finds a stream from which to drink. The deer would be frantic and exhausted ! That is a condition which many will be able to relate to in our hectic lives, perhaps finding faith after a time of metaphorically searching in the wilderness.

Knowing God

We have to be careful not to give the impression that being a Christian means learning about God. Christianity is not just for the intellect, it is for the heart as well for the head. Christianity can degenerate into little more than an intellectual system of factual beliefs, but the Christian faith isn't knowing about things, it is 'encounter,' meeting **with** God, rather than knowing **about** him. Our faith is an answer to our angst, to

our lostness, to our seeking. Christian faith provides answers to meaninglessness because it introduces us to God in a real and personal way. The Gospel stories of Jesus in the Bible tell about so many people who met with God in Jesus and how he established relationships with them. These Gospels are not textbooks, giving theoretical knowledge about the universe, they are introductions to a God who loves us and who became human, as Jesus of Nazareth.

God doesn't reject us

The Bible tells us that although we may be rejected by people, we will never be rejected by God. Jesus shows us what God is like -

1. Jesus met Zacchaeus, a terrible cheating tax collector who climbed a tree to try and see him, thinking himself too sinful to be with ordinary people. Jesus saw him, called him near and said 'I'm coming to have tea with you.'

2. There was a woman who wanted to touch the clothes which Jesus wore, recognising that he was someone with special power. She hardly dared to go near him, because she suffered from a physical illness which made her a social outcast. Yet Jesus reached out to her and healed her.

The message of the life of Jesus is that God welcomes everybody. Even the great Apostle Paul who tortured and killed Christians, was accepted and welcomed into the Church!

Can God speak to us?

Christians sometimes sing a children's song, '*the wise man built his house upon the rock.*' We are not singing about the Christian faith as a good belief structure, or a good set of rules. Some people learn about God and study religious beliefs, but they never move away from the academic facts. However Christians make a profound claim that God can be known, that a part of our soul can draw close to God in a personal way, just like in a human relationship. We also know from the stories of Christian people, that sometimes God doesn't wait for us to take the initiative in getting to know or understand about him. Many people describe a religious awakening as a time when God seemed to be 'knocking on the door.' God may be seeking after you now! You probably won't hear any heavenly voices, or see bright lights, but nevertheless you may be conscious in your soul that God is there and waiting for you to respond.



Faith is being prepared to take a risk, daring to believe.

Each one of us is involved in relationships, we know other people and have interaction with them. The Christian faith is about such a relationship, an encounter with God.

In the Bible, The Apostle Paul uses the same word to describe God drawing

near to us, as we might use of a couple getting back together again. In an episode of the TV series ER, Susie and Mark had been having this long drawn out 'will they won't they,' 'on/off,' relationship. He would never tell her that he loved her and she would never say anything to him. Eventually she is about to leave town to start a new life in Philadelphia and she goes off and he hasn't said how he feels. We are left for a few minutes thinking, 'if only he had told her how much he loved her, she would have fallen into his arms and they would have been happy ever after.' Just when we think all is lost he runs half the streets of the city to get to the train station. He catches her as she is getting on the train, makes a statement of his love, and begs her to stay. At that moment it is all out in the open and she has the opportunity to reciprocate. The train is slowly pulling out of the station, they have been close friends for ages and now he is asking her to be his for ever. Will she? Won't she? What does she do? Actually she says, - 'no'. She wants to start a new life somewhere else, then she jumps back on the train. She is in no doubt that he loves her, but she decides that she is not going to take this any further.

Each one of us is in the same type of position with God. God is not an inanimate rock to be studied, not a cold lifeless concept to be explored. God is personal, and we were made in the image of God. So, Christians believe that in the person of Jesus, God came running after you. The Jesus we see crucified on the cross is God's free and endless commitment of love. You and I are in the same position as Susie. We can enter into the experience of that relationship, not knowing all the answers, taking lots of risks, or we can get on the train and say 'no.' It is your choice.

It takes faith to reject God

Some people are afraid of even beginning to draw closer to God. They want answers first and some kind of proof. However it is just as much a leap of faith not to believe in God as it is to eventually get to the stage where you take the plunge and open up yourself to the risk of faith. Science and human knowledge can neither prove or disprove God, belief or unbelief demands a certain amount of 'faith' because we just don't know enough! In the absence of any compelling proof we might be tempted to say that we do not know enough 'about' God. But God does not want or need you to be clever and know facts, God simply wants you to draw close. There is a vast wealth of amazing information about God and how people have worshipped, yet faith is not an academic affair. It should rather be like a love affair to which we respond with our hearts and commit our lives.

It is through this encounter that we grow to 'know' God. The word 'knowledge' in the bible is used of the very closest relationships and it is this kind of bond which we can share in God's company. This is something which is very hard in our society today, particularly because very few people have time to think about anything anymore, everybody is so busy. The problem about living very busy lives is that we can become shallow. We can become cut off from our spiritual roots. Perhaps never before has there been so much need for people to be open to God and recognize the spiritual part of their lives.

We should learn as much as we can about what God has taught us through the bible and the lives of other Christians. However the most important thing that we can do is allow space for God to touch our lives. The bible teaches that when we seek God we shall find him. In the Psalms (34:8) in the Old Testament it says

'Taste and see that the Lord is good'.

A dish may look good and be recommended by the chef, but we will only know for ourselves if we try it and taste. We can talk recipes until we are blue in the face, but it is only when we taste that we can appreciate what food is like. Have you an appetite to know God, to taste and see, that is the big question ?

Doubts

Our human weakness is such that even in the most committed relationships we sometimes need reassurance. Christian faith is no different and at times everyone of us will have doubts and difficulty with belief. That is why we use the word **'faith,'** because it is not about proof, we are involved in a relationship with God and there has to be trust. It has been said that there can be *'an inverse relationship between vehement pronouncement and inner certainty.'* People are often most zealous about things which they are not quite or cannot be quite sure about! On the other hand, doubt can be an indication of real honesty and can help our faith to grow as we question and learn.

We probably all have stories of how people have been 'put off,' by earnest Christians or other religious fundamentalists who bully them about what they should believe. We all appreciate being given the opportunity to think and reflect in our time and at our own pace.

Sharing our ideas and thoughts about God should never be 'forcing our religion down other people's throats'. Listen to a passage from 1 Peter 3:15

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ...".

The passage suggests sharing faith only when the other person has given us permission to do so. Live out your Christian witness courageously, but be careful about what you say. This is probably the very best witness anyway, actions speak far louder than words.

If you are somebody who is unsure about the Christian faith, then do speak with somebody who is a Christian and ask them about what they believe. Faith is caught and not taught. In my experience people are seldom argued into belief, but rather spend time being drawn towards faith. As we look back we realise that there has been a process, which can take place over years and often involves people. We are also usually attracted most of all by the lives of other Christian people, not what they believe. This means that most people come to faith over a long period, they slowly become Christians, and I think that for many people it can be years rather than months. The best thing is to start by joining a church and meeting other Christians.

What do Christians believe ?

I have always found it helpful when making a summary of Christian belief, to use the words which are found in a form of the baptism service. At this special service in church we welcome children or adults into membership and the people who are present are asked to declare their commitment to some important beliefs. Imagine that you are in the baptism service and consider these three questions.



Christians believe that the world was made by somebody who knew what they were doing – it wasn't an accident.

Question 1

Do you believe and trust in God the Father who made the world ?

Between 5,000 million and 4,000 million years ago the earth was formed. By 3,000 million years ago life had arisen and we have fossils of microscopic bacteria-like creatures to prove it. Some time between these two dates that mysterious event occurred, the origin of life. We don't know how it all happened, there are many biological and scientific theories which try to explain what processes were taking place. One day we may come to know how creatures were created from the building blocks of life itself. However, more importantly, we need to think about who or what caused creation. Where did the basic substances; methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide, and other gases come from?

There are some Christians who take Genesis literally and believe that God made the world in six days and then had a rest on the seventh. There is not time to debate this point in this booklet, suffice to say that this is the view of only some Christians, and it is based on selecting one of the two different accounts of creation which are found in Genesis itself. Other Christians believe that the creation story in the Bible paints a poetic picture of creation, but it doesn't tell us how it happened.

Christians all agree that the Bible teaches us that it wasn't all an accident. It didn't happen by chance, behind creation there was a Creator, it was if you like 'An Act of God.'

Most people when asked, do not feel that they are an accident. One thing upon which all the world's great religions agree, is that life

comes from God and it is not an accident but precious to him. Most of us would say that we don't feel like an accident, we feel special. The Christian faith tells that although as human beings we co-operate with God in the work of creation, it was God who made us, who loves us and that God cares about us. Each one of us is not an accident, but rather an Act of God, made for a purpose. It is only when we meet with our Creator that we realise just how important our lives really are and what God's purpose for us is.



We don't know how the world was made, but Christians believe that they do know who made it.

Where did the world come from ?

If you look at the story of creation in Genesis in the Old Testament there are no big bang theories, no theories of evolution, we are not told which test tubes God mixed to create life. This is very sad, since we all love to understand how things come about, but God does not give us the science. Instead we have a story, which tells us in broad brush principles that God made it and that sadly we messed it all up.

There is nothing which says whether it was made by evolution; perhaps it was and perhaps it wasn't. The old debate is rather sterile and as Christians we simply have to say we don't know how. When Darwin wrote his book '*On the origin of the species by means of natural selection*' in 1859, it created rows of immense proportions. Sadly it was a futile argument, because the Bible does not seek to give us a chronological account of creation in the creation stories. Indeed modern chronological timescales are of little importance to any of the biblical writers. In the Gospel stories in the New Testament the writers move incidents from the beginning of Jesus ministry to the end. The order in which the events were placed was not considered important. This is not a new understanding, hundreds of years ago Saint Augustine suggested that the Biblical writers might have been presenting a literary account of creation, rather than a scientific one and that creation might have taken a long time. To use the word 'day,' is a good way of separating the things that God did. This would explain how the story has day and night, before the sun and moon were created! Truthfully there is much we just do not know, What the Bible is clear about, is that it was God who made the world and it tells us how we should respond to it. As an example we learn that work was planned into society as a means of us being occupied

and producing from the world. God is a God of work. We might conclude that God would not be pleased at the thought of unemployment. Politicians often say that Christians should keep out of political and secular issues. This is a strange idea because for us there is no dividing line between church things and state things. God put it all together and he laid down principles for living. We live in God's world, it is vibrant and full of God's life. The Old Testament prophets saw this. They saw the mind of God in simple illustrations from life, like boiling pots and plumb lines, and so they were angry when they saw poor people exploited and powerful people who took advantage of the weak.

The Christian view is that Creation is good and of value in itself, apart from its usefulness to mankind. In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, which means 'beginning,' it says

'God saw everything that He had made and it was good'. Gen 1:31

In one of the Gospel stories in the New Testament, the part of the bible which recorded the life of Jesus, the Apostle John wrote

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. John 3:16

The word for world is KOSMOS which means everything! God loves everything including the soil and the fields, all of creation and space itself. So it is that Christians believe that the world is not a larder simply to be consumed for our own use

Question 2

Do you believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ, who redeemed humankind ?

All the worlds major religions agree on the first question, God created all that there is. What makes Christians different is that they believe something very important about a man called Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago and who grew up in a Jewish community in Nazareth. The historical evidence for the life of Jesus is recorded by independent Jewish and Roman historians, as well as by his followers in the pages of the New Testament. However, Christians believe that Jesus was not merely a man, but God himself in human form. Jesus made this claim for himself and it brought him into conflict with the religious and civil authorities at the time. The final result was that Jesus was killed, by being nailed to a wooden cross. Christians

believe that three days after his death Jesus rose from the dead. He spoke with his disciples and assured them that he had conquered death. So it was that they need never be afraid, even of death itself, God would always be with them. The first disciples believed so passionately in the teaching of Jesus and were so sure that he was alive, that their message spread far and wide. They led brave lives teaching about Jesus and many were tortured and killed for their faith. Yet so strong was their belief and so powerful the message, that within centuries the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity and the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian.

The most important church service is one called Holy Communion, which Jesus commanded his disciples to do in remembrance of him. In that service we remember that Jesus died on a cross and that as he did so he said *'Father forgive them'* and poured out forgiveness, even on those who crucified him. In this service we are reminded of God's great love for us his children and the forgiveness which the death of Jesus assures us of. Can you believe in a God who forgives us even when we reject him and nail him to a cross? That is what is meant when we say he *'redeemed humankind,'* God loves and forgives everybody. We can be confident that the words of scripture which have become for us a hymn are true
'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.' Phil 2:10

What we believe about Jesus is critical as to whether or not we should call ourselves Christian. He made bold statements and said that the words he spoke and the things he did, were nothing less than the words and actions of God himself. If Jesus was telling the truth then in his life we can see what God is like. We can see that he cares for us, that he goes out of his way to forgive and help us.

Question 3

Do you believe and trust in his Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God ?

After his death and resurrection, Jesus left his disciples to spread the good news of all that he had said and done. He also gave them a promise that the Holy Spirit would always be with them. Christians believe that God's Spirit is still with them enabling the church to serve God in the world. This is what makes the church different from just

another club or human organisation, it is a place where Christians can come together and find God present in a special way.

It is strange to think of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet although we know God in these three ways we are told that he is very much the same God. Jesus prayed that the oneness which he had with God should be in his church as well. For this reason Christians should learn to put aside differences and share together as one church.

Conclusion

Faith in God has to make sense and stand up to investigation. This does not mean that we have to be able to understand God, but if we believe that God made this world then we should not be afraid to engage in debate with science, history or reason. Faith should make sense of this world in which we live and enable us to live in a better way. Yet the purpose of faith in God is to trust and serve God, to know and love God. Terrible things might happen to us in this life, dreadful things which are not God's will at all. Things like war, cancer, death and road accidents are not the work of a loving God and it is foolish to imagine that God causes them. It is a terrible thing to imagine that everything which happens is 'meant to be'. Indeed some of the terrible things we do to each other must make the heart of God bleed.

Being a Christian will not make you immune to such things, and being a Christian will not be the end of all your problems, even Jesus found himself killed and hated. However, faith in God causes us to think and behave in ways that work with the grain of the universe. Faith in God can even bring good out of terrible tragedies. It is as if we suddenly discover which way the tide is running and learn to swim with it, rather than against it. We were made to know and serve God and there can be no better way for us to live than what we were made for. To ignore God is like running a car on the wrong kind of petrol. However when we open ourselves to God's ideas then it is like suddenly finding the right fuel. We still have to encounter difficulties, but we know that God is with us co-operating with us no matter what problems we face. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote

'all things work for good for those who love God.' Romans 8:28.

Some prayers which you may find helpful

God of goodness, give me yourself. For you are sufficient for me
If I were to ask for anything less I should always be in want,
for in you alone do I have all.

Julian of Norwich (?1342 - after 1413)

O God, our true life, to know you is life, to serve you is perfect
freedom, to enjoy you is a kingdom, to praise you is the joy and
happiness of the soul. I praise and bless and adore you, I worship
you, I glorify you. I give thanks to you for your great glory. I humbly
beg you to live with me, to reign in me, to make this heart of mine a
holy temple, a fit habitation for your divine majesty. *St Augustine*
354 -430

'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in you' *St Augustine 354 -430*

All shall be well, and all shall be well,
and all manner of things shall be well",
Julian of Norwich (?1342 - after 1413)

May the love of the Lord Jesus
draw you to himself,
May the power of the Lord Jesus
strengthen you in his service,
May the joy of the Lord Jesus fill your soul
May the blessing of God almighty
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
be with you and remain with you
and those you love this day and evermore.
Amen.

If you would like to discuss further any of the information
found in this booklet, please contact the Minister,
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