

Life's Ultimate Question

Introduction

Columnist Herb Caen wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle; when the sun comes up, you'd better be running." The lion in us has worn out a lot of running shoes!

We are what we run after— what we seek. Our pursuits define us. Like a symphony, dominant themes sound repeatedly. For heroin addicts, it's the need for a fix. Nothing else matters. In the beginning they choose heroin, but soon the drug makes all the decisions. A merciless tyrant rules. No days off. No vacations. No sick days. No benefits. The lion is eating poisoned gazelle. He can't help it. When the gazelle runs, he *must* run too.

Innumerable other poisoned gazelles don't have heroin's stigma, but are just as cruel. The love of money and the things it buys, for example, plays the music to which multitudes march. More is better, but never enough. Like scratching a poison ivy rash, we can't kill the itch to have more things. The garage, attic, and basement are packed with unnecessary purchases, but surely our next acquisition will satisfy the accumulation itch! It never does. Temporarily, it seems to help, but soon the tingle returns. The love of money and things controls us. We can't help running after them, even though they bring no lasting satisfaction. Like the lion, we wake up every morning burning with a passion to have more, more, more.

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We pursue but never catch the bobbing merry-go-round pony of satisfaction just ahead of us. Round and round we go, ever reaching, but never grasping what we seek. It remains forever elusive. Millions have stepped off that senseless carousel and stopped seeking lasting satisfaction where it can't be found. **When all else fails...** they consult the Creator's directions. We'll be doing that together during the next six weeks.

All questions are welcome. Be patient with the leader of your group. He/she doesn't always have the answer at hand, but will try to find one for you. The more you get involved in the discussion, the better. Others will benefit when you share your ideas. It will also encourage them to share their thoughts. Remember— you are meeting with friends. Value everyone's opinion, even if you don't agree with it. After all, even your clone wouldn't agree with all your opinions! **What's said in the group should be treated as confidential.**

The next six weeks could be the most significant of your life. Please make attending the next five meetings a priority! The Creator of life wants to be found by us even more than we want to find Him. As we meet together, good things are going to happen! Light will penetrate the fog. Clear understanding will begin to replace blurriness. Life will make more sense. Hang in there!

God Created You for a Purpose

Does Old Mean Old-fashioned?



Does a religion with 3,500-year-old roots have anything to say to us today? After all, those who wrote the Bible couldn't have imagined the modern world with its DNA sequencing, Blu-Ray players, i-Pads, smart-phones, and cloning. Like a sprouting teenager putting on last year's winter coat, and finding the sleeves several inches too short, perhaps we've outgrown Christianity. **What do you think?**

What's It All About?

Many who think they've tried Christianity on for size, really haven't. Some window-shop but make no purchases. Others settle for faith in a box that's opened once each week for an hour or two. Many attended church regularly as children, but quit before they understand what it's all about.



In July, 1990, Jack Selcher's father and he packed powdered milk for their fishing trip to Lake Megiscane in Quebec. It had been around the house for a *long* time, but it definitely wasn't aged to perfection! Mixed with water, it would have caused a cat to swear off milk the rest of his life! Jack and his dad didn't say, "I'm not drinking milk anymore!" They knew the powdered pretender was just that.



Although the majority of persons in our country profess Christianity, many don't know *what* or *why* they believe. During World War II an American soldier was fatally wounded. Minutes before he died, he asked Leroy Eims, a fellow Marine, to help him get right with God. Leroy

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felt absolutely helpless. He had no idea what to tell him. It was a turning point in Leroy's life. Suppose you had been in Leroy's place. **How would you have felt? What would you have said?**

Pop the Lid



Although Christianity applies to modern living, many never get it out of the can. For at least two years, a can of waterproofing paint rested on Jack's basement floor less than 10-feet from a wall that frequently leaked. After he finally applied the waterproofing in April 1998, the wall didn't leak again the rest of the year.

To say that Christianity *can't* be applied is very different from saying that it *hasn't* been applied. Like the paint, when Christianity is applied, it works. That doesn't mean it seals every financial and relational difficulty out of our lives. Sometimes it even brings new problems. We won't escape unexpected deaths of loved ones, financial problems, ruptured relationships, etc. this side of the grave, but we can know that we will never have to face them alone. **What problems are flooding through the walls of the lives of the people you know?**

A Needless Shortage

Our culture is concerned about the shortage of fossil fuels. We should be, but a more pressing problem is the shortage of love in our homes and relationships. We all desperately need to love and be loved to be emotionally healthy persons.



Christina Onassis was an unwanted, unloved child. Her father insisted on aborting her. Her mother refused. Christina had the riches that

many spend their whole lives pursuing. Her father frequently gave her fabulously expensive gifts. None of them made her life fulfilling. He named the largest yacht in the world after her. It was one of her *least* favorite places.

She preferred her parents' time and affection, but they were in short supply. She spent her whole life looking for the love they didn't give her. She never found it. At least four marriages ended in divorce. Her life had no apparent purpose other than looking for love and satisfying her every desire. She died before she was forty, supposedly of a heart attack, but perhaps of a broken heart. **Would you rather be the richest person in the world or the most loved? Why?**

God already loves us! Let's read Luke 15:1-24.

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. ⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is

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rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons.¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

What is the main point in these three stories?
(See especially verses 7, 10 and 24).

Let’s read 1 John 4:7-12 which describes how God’s love and our love are connected.

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. **What is the connection between God’s love for us and our love for others?**

Why Am I Here?

The late astronomer Carl Sagan believed we can’t discover a purpose for life outside ourselves so we have to make up our own. He also believed that there is no Parent to care for us, forgive our errors, and save us from our mistakes. Let’s read John 10:7-11.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them.⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

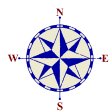
Do Jesus’ words support or contradict Carl Sagan? How?

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Leo Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* called it “one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature.” In *A Confession* Tolstoy described his search for meaning and purpose. For a time he drank heavily, had sex with many women, gambled, and led a wild life but found no satisfaction. He both inherited money and made a lot through his books but found no fulfillment in wealth. He became world famous but that didn’t answer his basic questions. He looked for purpose in a wonderful wife and thirteen children to no avail. He searched for meaning for his life in the cupboards of science and philosophy but found them bare. After looking in all the wrong places, he realized that Russian peasants who had none of the finer things he had, found purpose through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Bernard Levin wasn’t a Christian but was perhaps the outstanding English columnist of his generation. He confessed in “Life’s Great Riddle, and No Time to Find Its Meaning” that he hadn’t yet discovered why he was born. He doubted that he had enough time to do so before he died. He *had* to know why he was born because he couldn’t accept that it was an accident. Many people have no reason to live. We need one. **Do you have a purpose that gives meaning to your life? If so, what is it?**

The Magnetic North of Purpose



Let’s read John 14:1-6. ¹ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may

be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Jesus is the way to the Father’s house. **Is that relevant? Why? If he is the *truth*, what relevance does that have today?**



Jesus claims to give spiritual life that is eternal. Mother Teresa’s vibrant spiritual life sparkled like a diamond underneath her unimpressive outward appearance. Jesus offers us a spiritual life transfusion that reveals itself through attitudes and actions that demonstrate love, joy, peace, putting up with others, gentleness, faith, goodness, strength under control, and self-control. The characteristics of Jesus’ life are called the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

Prisoners No More

Let’s read John 8:31-32. ³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” **What sets people free?**



George Hunter III asked believers who did not come from Christian families, “From what, if anything, did Christ set you free?” Almost all of them could point to something. Some found freedom from a life governed by rules, and others from an aimless way of life without rules. Some had escaped the negative influence of their peer group, or some belief system or idolatry. Some were freed from guilt and others from the grip sin had on their lives. Some had diseases that were healed. Some were set free from emotional problems

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like worry. Many found victory over a too low or too high opinion of themselves. Some escaped the bondage of addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc. The haunting memories of child abuse were erased for some. Many no longer feared death or the future. Some were released from the chains of self-centeredness, envy, jealousy, hatred, prejudice or the need to control everything.

I don't know anyone well that doesn't have at least one out of balance area in his/her life. **Do you? What are some addicting and enslaving influences in the lives of people today?**

A Purpose Discovered

Jack Selcher at one time didn't understand the life that Jesus offers. His parents took him to church beginning when he was a small boy. By the time he was a college freshman, he considered himself morally superior to most people. He took pride in never smoking or using alcoholic beverages. He knew a lot about the Bible and had spent thousands of hours riding church pews. One thing he didn't have was Jesus' life. His purpose was to excel in sports and school to win the love and acceptance of others. The thought of dying scared him. A cloud of guilt hung over him. He believed in heaven but had no assurance he'd go there when he died.

The preachers and teachers in his church told him repeatedly that Jesus had died on a cross to pay the penalty for his moral and spiritual imperfections. The words didn't make sense to him. He thought of Jesus' death as a down payment on his passage to heaven. He believed he had to make regular payments by the good things he did.

Let's read 1 John 5:11-13. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. The one who has the Son also has eternal life. During the fall of 1968 as a result of hearing those verses Jack understood that he didn't need to make any payments at all. Jesus had paid the penalty for his moral imperfections *in full*. When he trusted in Jesus' sacrifice alone to give him right standing with God, he received a spiritual life transfusion. Because God loved and accepted him as he was, he wanted to do what pleased Him. Love, little by little, began to displace fear as a dominant motivator in his life.

His fear of death vanished. God lifted the weight of guilt for his moral failures when he trusted Jesus' death as payment in full. He had assurance that he'd go to heaven because he knew he could trust Jesus and His promises. The new life he received wouldn't allow him to relate to God or others in the same old ways. He felt a twinge of conscience after talking in a negative way about people who weren't present—something he'd done repeatedly for years without thinking twice about it. God convicted him that his language needed attention. Blue language was a symptom of the anger and desire for control that swirled within him. Gradually he saw improvement. Little by little God's love for and acceptance of him freed him to love and accept others. He gradually developed a strong desire to serve others that he didn't have before the fall of 1968. His goal became to know Jesus better and to help others know Him too. Working toward that goal brought a measure of fulfillment he'd never known when he was doing his own thing.

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A LIFE Experienced

Let's read the description of the life Jesus offers in Galatians 5:22-23 again. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **What scares you about a life with these characteristics? What attracts you?**

Jesus Is Unique



You have been called for jury duty for a very significant and unusual trial. Your assignment is to determine Jesus' identity. Your verdict will influence every human being's beliefs about Him until the end of time.

First you need to determine if Jesus really lived. If He did, was He just an unusually gifted human being or something more?



The first two experts to take the stand are Dr. Fred Jones, a philosophy professor, and Dr. Mary Smith, a biology professor. They both doubt that Jesus even lived. They believe He was probably the invention of someone's vivid imagination. If He lived, He certainly didn't perform the miracles credited to Him. Natural laws govern life on earth. Miracles can't happen. People can't walk on water. They can't raise the dead.

Do you agree that miracles *can't* happen? Do natural laws, like gravity, explain what *usually* happens or what *must* happen? Why?



The third expert, Dr. John Freemont, a seminary professor, quotes Philip Schaff, a church historian, who wrote, "A character so original, so complete, so uniformly consistent, so perfect, so human and yet so high above all human greatness, can be neither a fraud nor a fiction." ¹ He reminds the jury that a poet is greater than his poem and a writer than his characters. He insists that the one who thought up Jesus would be greater than Jesus. **Does John's argument make sense to you? Why?**

Dr. Freemont next quotes Otto Betz, who wrote, "No serious students of history believe

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that Jesus was a made-up character.”² Freemont refers to the words of Professor F.F. Bruce, an outstanding biblical scholar and historian, who affirmed that unbiased historians agree that Jesus is as historical as Julius Caesar.³



He cites ancient writers outside of the Bible who referred to Jesus including Cornelius Tacitus, Lucian, Flavius Josephus, Seutonius, Pliny the Younger, Tertullian, Thallus, and Justin Martyr. He quotes the passages in their writings that mention Jesus. Dr. Freemont's expert testimony seems to stack the evidence heavily in favor of Jesus' existence.

You wonder why Drs. Jones and Smith spoke so confidently despite so much evidence that Jesus did exist. **How could they benefit from believing that Jesus never lived or at least that He has no authority over them?**

The next exhibit includes the New Testament documents. Because of the importance of the case, you're given three days to read carefully from Matthew through the Gospel of John.



You notice that the four Gospels paint a consistent, coherent picture of Jesus. A few minor details don't seem to agree, for example, the details of the resurrection accounts. You ask yourself, "Did Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John get together and 'invent' a Jesus who never really lived? If they didn't invent him, did they greatly exaggerate His accomplishments? If so, why would all four suffer death or persecution for a make-believe story?"

Do you believe the story of Jesus was made up or exaggerated? Why?

How did Jesus relate to:

1. Children (Matthew 19:13-15)¹³ Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.¹⁴ Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

2. The Bereaved (Luke 7:11-17)¹¹ Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.¹² As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her.¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!"¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people."¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

3. Society's Outcasts (Matthew 9:10-13)¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

4. The Sick (Mark 1:40-45)⁴⁰ A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If

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you are willing, you can make me clean.”⁴¹

Jesus was indignant - He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:⁴⁴ “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.



Jesus was humble before God (John 6:38) and man— He washed his disciples’ dirty feet (John 13: 1-17). He was morally pure to the core—neither His friends nor His enemies could disprove His claim to be sinless (John 8:46). He taught people to love their enemies and did it Himself. He said the most loving thing anyone could do was to lay down his life for a friend, and then did it. He always did what He told others to do.

Do you see that same consistency between word and deed in your own life or in anyone you know? If so, who? If not, why not?



You discover that Jesus left people awestruck. He taught with amazing authority (Mark 1:21-22; John 7:46). He stilled a storm (Mark 4:35-41), fed 5,000 with a boy’s lunch (Mark 6:30-44), and walked on the water (Mark 6:45-52). He healed persons oppressed with fever, leprosy, blindness, and demons. He raised a boy (Luke 7:11-17) and Lazarus (John 11:1-53) from the dead. **How do you account for His apparent power over nature, disease, demons, and death?**

In the four Gospels, Jesus asserted that He was more than just a man. Some of His claims are direct, and others are indirect. The issue at His trial was who He was, not what He’d done. At the trial the high priest asked if He was the Messiah, the Son of the glorious God. Let’s read Mark 14:61-64 and Matthew 27:41-43:⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”⁶² “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked.⁶⁴ “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death.

⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him.

⁴² “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

What did the high priest and the whole Jewish council understand that Jesus was claiming?

Consider Jesus’ claims and the Jews’ responses in the following three passages:

John 5:17-18 - ¹⁷ In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”¹⁸ For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 8:58-59 - ⁵⁸ “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”⁵⁹ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but

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Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

John 10:30-33 - ³⁰ I and the Father are one.” ³¹ Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, ³² but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” ³³ “We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

Because the Jews believed in only *one* God, how did they react?

Jesus made many indirect claims to deity. Welcoming Him means welcoming the Father (Mark 9:37). Honoring Jesus means honoring the Father (John 5:23). Knowing Him means knowing the Father (John 8:19). Believing in Him means believing in the Father (John 12:44). Seeing Him means seeing the Father (John 14:9). Hating Him means hating the Father (John 15:23).



Jesus received and accepted worship as God. Let's read about a man Jesus healed who fell down and

worshipped Him (John 9:35-39). ³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” ³⁸ Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

When Jesus got into the boat after walking on the water, His disciples worshipped Him (Matthew 14:33). In John 20:27-29, Thomas addressed Jesus as “My Lord and my God.”

Jesus never said, “Don’t worship me, worship God!” **If Jesus was a mere man and received worship reserved for God alone, was He even a good man? Why?**

After you’ve read the four Gospels, Dr. Freemont asks you to base your determination of Jesus’ identity on who He actually claimed to be. He refers to the words of C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. Lewis states that, although many try, one can’t logically accept Jesus as a great moral teacher while rejecting His claims to be God. Why not? An *ordinary* person who claimed to be God would either be totally insane or a world-class liar. ⁴ You roll Lewis’ logic over and over in your mind.

When you base Jesus’ identity on his claim to be God, what options are there other than Lord, liar or lunatic?

The time has come for the jury to make a decision. **Which of the three options do you personally choose-- Lord, Liar or Lunatic? Why?**

Notes

1. Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910, p. 109.
2. Betz, Otto. *What Do We Know About Jesus?* SCM Press, 1968. p. 9.
3. Bruce, F.F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Downers Grove, Ill. InterVarsity Press, 1972. p. 119.
4. Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952. p. 40-41.

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You Can Trust the Bible

Fingerprints or a Hug



Are you satisfied with the “fingerprints” of God discovered in nature, history, reason, and conscience? Do you long to *know* the artist whose canvas is the heavens. You can! Have you read His book? In it He communicates His nature, promises, and expectations. **How have you learned about God?**

A Unique Book



The Bible claims to be God-breathed and useful for learning truth (2 Timothy 3:16).

It will last forever (Isaiah 40:8).



It is living, active, penetrating, and it judges (Hebrews 4:12).

It gives spiritual life to the spiritually dead (1 Peter 1:23).

An Authoritative Book



Anyone could claim to speak for God. How do we know people didn't just make things up and write them down? A very severe Old Testament test weeded out impostors. If a “prophet's” predictions didn't come true, that prophet was put to death (Deuteronomy 18:20).

God worked through men to produce the best-selling book ever written. God moved the men who moved the pen. He communicated His truth through the unique style and personality of each writer.

Do most people prefer to live under the authority of the Bible or to decide for themselves what to accept or reject in it? **Why?**

A Mirror for the Soul



Let's suppose you're feeling fine when you go to the doctor for a check-up. You expect a good report. You don't get it. After detecting something suspicious, the doctor sends you for a biopsy. He calls several days later and informs you of a life-threatening cancer of the colon. You need to do something about it immediately. **Is it wise to put more confidence in how you feel than in the doctor's diagnosis? Why?** God's word, like a biopsy, reveals the spiritual cancer of the inner person. Most of us think our inner stuff is “sugar and spice and everything nice.” God's word describes the core of our being as deceitful above all things and beyond cure (Jeremiah 17:9). **Is it wise to put more confidence in how we feel about ourselves than in the diagnosis of the “Doctor”? Why?**

A God-Revealing Book



Many think God is like a safe, nonjudgmental, all-loving Grandfather. Is He?



On one hand, John 3:16 records that God loves people enough to sacrifice His Son's life to save them. On the other hand, Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” This verse describes the fate of those who haven't accepted God's offer of forgiveness.

Is it wise to put more confidence in how we feel than in the diagnosis of the “Doctor”? Why is an accurate understanding of God's nature, promises, and expectations important?

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A Hebrew Book



The Old Testament has 39 books. Moses wrote the first five about 1400 BC. We don't know the human authors of many of the rest. God both inspired and protected the writing of these books and superintended their collection. Almost all were written in Hebrew. Malachi wrote the last one about 430 B.C. The Old Testament, therefore, was written and collected over a period of 1,000 years.

A Greek Book

The New Testament includes 27 books. Apostles or men closely connected with the Apostles wrote the original documents in Greek. The first books written were James and Galatians about A. D. 50. The last was Revelation about A. D. 95. The New Testament was written over a period of about 45 years.

A Reliable Book



Because the Scriptures were written on perishable materials, we have only copies of copies. The earliest surviving New Testament fragment is dated about A. D. 130.¹ The Bodmer Library in Geneva, Switzerland, has copies from the late 100s and early 200s.²

Some persons assume that over the centuries as the books of the Bible were copied and recopied, so many errors crept into them that they aren't reliable. Is that the case?

Two tests measure the reliability of a copy of an ancient writing. The shorter the time between the original and the oldest copy is the less chance for error. The number of copies is also important. Multiple copies help experts detect and eliminate copying errors.

Based on these two tests, the New Testament is far more reliable than any other ancient writing.³ For other ancient works, 900-1400 years separate the originals and the oldest existing manuscripts. Only a few hundred years separate the originals and the oldest copies of the New Testament. Instead of the usual 10-15 manuscripts of ancient classics, over 5,000 manuscripts contain at least part of the New Testament.⁴ If the Bible is discarded on the trash heap as too error-laden to trust, all other ancient literature must be thrown there as well.

An English Book

The Bible was first translated into Old English about the 7th century. Under John Wycliffe's influence, the 14th century produced two English versions of the whole Bible. In 1534 after the invention of the printing press, William Tyndale published an English New Testament. After seven years of work, a team of scholars completed the King James Version in 1611. It was the Bible of the English world for 300 years.⁵

During the 20th century many new translations appeared. In the United States the New International Version, completed in 1978, outsells the King James Version. It was a cooperative effort of over 100 scholars from various denominations.⁶ **Have you read more than one version of the Bible? If so, which is your favorite? Why?**

A Unified Book



The Bible is unique. Although 40 authors wrote it over a 1500-year period, it is a *single* book. The door between the two testaments is open. Genesis begins with the creation of heaven and earth. Revelation, the last book, ends with the creation of the *new*

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heavens and earth. In the New Testament Christ carries out the Old Testament roles performed by the prophet, priest, and king. His New Testament crucifixion eliminated the necessity of the repeated sacrifices described in the Old Testament. His giving of the Spirit fulfills the prophet's prediction that God's law would be written on the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

A Prophetic Book



The Bible foretells the future. Christ fulfilled over 350 Old Testament prophecies

(<http://www.bibleprobe.com/300great.htm>).

For example, He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:1-6). He would be raised from the grave (Psalm 16:10 and Matthew 28:1-10)

A Trustworthy Book



Jesus held a lofty view of the authority of the Old Testament.

1. In Matthew 22:29 he said, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."

2. In John 10:35 he said, "...the Scripture cannot be broken..."

3. In Matthew 5:17-18 he said that he didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets [the Old Testament] but to fulfill them. He said that "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

A Resurrected Witness



Jesus' opinions about the Scriptures are only important if He is God, as He

claimed. His identity is linked to an historical event. He is declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

Lord Darling, a former Chief Justice of England, brought a legal perspective to the evidence for the resurrection. He concluded, "There exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true." ⁷

Jesus' followers claimed He talked with them after He had risen from the dead (Acts 1:3). Were they all liars and fools? Tradition holds that enemies of the faith killed all Jesus' disciples except John for preaching a resurrected Christ. **Would you die for what you knew was a lie? Would they? Why?**

What, if anything, would Jesus' disciples gain from inventing and then sticking to a resurrection story?

If Jesus rose from the dead and also believed the Old Testament was God's Word, how should that influence our opinion about the Scriptures?

A Sometimes Difficult Book



Some portions of Scripture are puzzling. How do we treat them? Bishop H. C. G. Moule said that because Christ absolutely trusted the Bible, he also reverently trusts in it despite the difficulties.⁸ Time and further study often eventually explain troublesome passages. Treat difficult biblical passages like a baked rainbow trout's bones. Don't choke on them! Just pick the meat away from them! Some day the "bones" might turn out to be as nourishing as the rest. **Does this principle, that you don't have to understand**

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everything the Bible says now, help you deal with biblical difficulties? Why?

An Unchallenged Book



Why couldn't Former President Bill Clinton get away with a claim that he had a completely unblemished record while serving in the White House? Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote their Gospels while many still lived who had witnessed the things Jesus said and did. Many of them were bitter enemies of the faith who would have certainly questioned any false or exaggerated statements. **What does the absence of any such challenge suggest?**



A Profitable Book

The Bible is an immensely profitable book. It equips believers for every good work. It is an authority on what to believe and how to live. It teaches that loving is better than hating, and forgiving than retaliating. It emphasizes giving more than receiving. Living in harmony with its teaching produces a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.



Former British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin said, "The Bible is a high explosive. But it works in strange ways and no living man can tell or know how that book, in its journey through the world, has startled the individual soul in ten thousand different places into a new life, a new world, a new belief, a new conception, a new faith."⁹ **How do you explain the vast life-changing influence of the Bible throughout history?**

Notes

1. Bruce, F. F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* InterVarsity Press. 1978. p. 17.

2. Ibid., p. 18.

3. McDowell, Josh. *More Than a Carpenter*. Tyndale. 1977. p. 49.

4. Bruce, F. F. "Transmission and Translation of the Bible." in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1, pp. 43-44.

5. Bruce, F. F. "Transmission and Translation of the Bible." in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 52.

6. Ibid., p. 56.

7. Green, Michael. *Man Alive*. 1968. InterVarsity Press. p. 54.

8. Henry, Carl F. H. "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 31.

9. Gumbel, Nicky. *Questions of Life*. 1996. David C. Cook. p. 71.

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All Religions Aren't Equal

You Can't Eat Soup with A Fork



Imagine a steaming bowl of tomato soup in front of you. To the left of the bowl is a fork. To the right is a spoon. **Which utensil will you use to eat the soup? Why?**

For almost 2,000 years Christianity has been the only “vehicle” *designed by God* to take human beings from earth to heaven. Getting people like us there is unimaginably difficult. Many believe all religions lead to the same destination. The truth is that all except Christianity have a serious flaw. They don't solve our most pressing spiritual problem.

Stranger in the Mirror

We see the dark, downward pull of sin at work in others with 20-20 clarity. It's *soooo* obvious! Their pride is as glaring as the morning sun in an eastbound traveler's face. Their pettiness is disgusting. They drive like idiots! Their kids are a mess. They're so self-centered!



When it comes to seeing our own faults, however, we're legally blind! What about *our* pride, pettiness, driving habits, kids, and self-centeredness? “Mirror, mirror on the wall, I can't see myself at all!” **Why are we so blind to many of our own faults?**



Did You Hug Your Serpent Today?

Sin *dominates* us. We're like alcoholics who insist they're perfectly in control of their drinking. Sin has us by the throat, but we won't admit it. Our natural rebelliousness seems like no big deal, and self-rule seems virtuous.

Independence from God and “sin-dependence” are closely connected.

We dwell in a God-centered universe, but live like *we're* in control. **Which is more natural for you—to give God control of your life or to control it yourself? Why?**

A foolish combination of independence, self-sufficiency, and imagined invulnerability sank the *Titanic*. Its builders gravely underestimated the destructive power of icebergs. Humans consistently misjudge the sinking power of sin. According to Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” and according to Romans 6:23, “the wages of sins is death.”



Wearing Exactly Wrong Glasses



Imagine wearing glasses that distort everything. Airplanes look like bluebirds and vice versa. Trees look like weeds and weeds like mature oaks. Black is white and white is black. Girls look like guys and guys like girls. Your view of the world doesn't correspond to reality at all. Your glasses are to blame.

The teachings of the Enlightenment of the 18th century are glasses that have influenced us to believe that people are basically good and have within themselves the resources to live a moral life, manage society, and solve all their problems. ¹ If that were true, every day in every way civilization should be getting better and better. **Is it? Explain.**

The belief that all religions are similar arose during the Enlightenment. Supposedly, religions look very different on the surface, but the deeper you go in each, the more similar they become. All are rooted in a common religious consciousness in the human heart. ² Many share similar moral values. None approve of

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adultery, theft or murder. The essence of the golden rule ("Do to others what you would have them do to you," Matthew 7:12) is contained in almost every religion since Confucius.³



We now know these 18th century ideas were *exactly* wrong! Religions are most alike at the surface. Imagine ten department store Santa Clauses in a lineup. Underneath the white beards and red suits are ten very different people. Similarly, each major religious tradition has its own *distinct* way of looking at the world.⁴ Religions aren't the same and *don't claim to be*.

Do Many Roads Lead to God?



Religions aren't interchangeable belief systems that lead to heaven by different routes. They often contradict each other. For example, Judaism rejects Jesus as the Messiah; Christianity affirms him. They can't *both* be correct. Either tolerance or truth must give way. **Which is more important to you? Why?**

Christianity *alone* teaches that people can have an intimate personal relationship with God. **How does that agree or disagree with your understanding of the Christian faith?**

Number One vs. Number Two



Different religions don't believe the same basic things at all. Let's contrast Christianity with Islam, the second most common religion in the world.

Muslims don't believe that man is at heart a sinner or that sin wrecks man's relationship with God.⁵ Christianity teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Muslims consider Jesus a prophet but not God's Son. Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us that God "has spoken to us by his Son."

Muslims say Jesus didn't bear the world's sins, didn't die on the cross, and that every person has to bear responsibility for personal sin. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul wrote that Christ died for *our* sins, and that he was buried and was raised the third day.



Muslims teach that almost everyone will spend at least some time in hell and perhaps all eternity. The only hopes for escaping it are Allah's will, the prayers of Mohammed and saintly Muslims, and one's own good deeds.⁶ According to 1 Timothy 2:3-5, God's doesn't want anyone to spend eternity in hell. There is one person who "goes to bat" for us before God and that person is not Mohammed, but Christ Jesus. According to Ephesians 2:8-9, escaping hell is by God's grace received through faith. It is not the result of works so that no one has any room to boast before God or men.

Four Key Differences

Islam teaches: (#1 - regular print) ; Christianity teaches: (#2 - bold print)

1. The Bible is corrupted and untrustworthy.
2. **All scripture is God-breathed and useful (2 Timothy 3:16).**
1. There is no religious assurance.
2. **We can know we have eternal life (1 John 5:13).**
1. One cannot know that he is forgiven.
2. **If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9).**

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1. The Holy Spirit doesn't live in the believer.⁷
2. **The Holy Spirit lives in believers (Romans 8:11).**

The Uniqueness of Jesus



In John 14:6 Jesus claimed that no one comes to the Father except through him. What he did on the cross has no counterpart in any other religion. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

Jesus is *uniquely* qualified. He is the "Holy and Righteous One" (Acts 3:14). He was without sin (1 Peter 2:22). He's the only one capable of paying the penalty for *our* sin because He was sinless and therefore had no penalty of his *own* to pay. The early church worshipped Him as God.⁸



Jesus lifts crushing guilt off fragile human shoulders. He gives strength to conquer the passions and desires that control us like the wind turns a weathervane. He gives peace to replace a petrifying fear of God's condemnation. He has already experienced that condemnation when He took our place on the cross. **Do the things Jesus offers correspond to the things you need in your innermost being? Explain.**

No other great religion has a savior. None has a God who personally paid the price to set his people free. No other forgives through undeserved favor *alone*. None has a religious leader who rose from the dead.

God's Truth Standard



Henry Rowland taught physics at Johns Hopkins University. At a trial in which he was an expert witness, he was asked about his qualifications. He said, "I am the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion."

Jesus is the greatest living expert on truth. Through Him God has revealed Himself in a form we can understand. He is God's "Show and Tell." He *lived* and *spoke* the truth.

God Will Deal Fairly with Those Who Never Heard about Jesus



If Jesus is really the *only* way to God, what about those who've never heard about Him? We can be sure that God will be just. Genesis 18:25 asks, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The expected answer is "Yes." No one will be saved because he is a Methodist, Hindu, or Buddhist. All receive salvation who accept God's unmerited forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ's sacrifice in their place.

The tax collector said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," and went home with a right relationship with God (Luke 18:9-14). The key requirements are a God-given sense of need for divine mercy, and trust in God to give it.⁹

The Good Works Flaw



We can't pave a road to heaven with our good deeds. That's like trying to lay a concrete four-lane highway across the United States from a single wheelbarrow of cement mix. That's the fatal flaw of almost every religion. The problem—we don't have *nearly* enough building material. Especially when that material is limited to the

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good things we've done *for the right reasons*.

What are some *self-serving* reasons for doing "good" things?



We *can* get to heaven from here, but there's only *one* way. It's narrow and impossibly steep. The good news — it's an escalator! God Himself constructed it at tremendous cost. It ends in heaven and begins one faith step in front of every person. According to Jesus, He is the only way to get there (John 14:6).

The Narrow Way to Life



The issue is truth, not a superiority complex. A math teacher expects her students to add two plus two and get the same answer she does. Four isn't the *best* answer. It's the only *right* one. There's no room for pride. No other answer will do.



Let's imagine a surgeon has a scalpel that hurts more than any other. It's also the *only* scalpel that unfailingly cures cancer. Suppose you have cancer. **Would you submit to that scalpel? Why?**

The Christian message has *never* been wildly popular. The scalpel hurts before it heals. It's painful to admit a total inability to meet God's right-living requirements. It's humbling to accept His unmerited forgiveness through trust in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection alone. The unrelenting, stubborn fact is that no other way leads to life.

Notes

1. Hunter III, George. *Church for the Unchurched*. Abingdon. 1996. p. 21.
2. Ibid. p. 22.
3. Gumbel, Nicky. *Searching Issues*. Cook Ministry Resources. 1996. p. 32.

4. Hunter, p. 23.
5. Green, Michael. *Evangelism Through the Local Church*. Oliver-Nelson Books. p. 55.
6. Ibid. p. 55.
7. Ibid. p. 56.
8. Gumbel. p. 29.
9. Gumbel. p. 35.

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Good People Don't Go to Heaven

Faith in the Blood



Over many years Bill O'Brien donated more than twelve gallons of blood. He said, "When that final whistle blows and St. Peter asks, 'What did you do?' I'll just say, 'Well, I gave 100 pints of blood,' " "That ought to get me in." ¹ **Do you think Bill's record is good enough to get him in? Why?**

Defining "Good"



Jack Selcher threw the javelin for Millersville State College. In 1968, 1969, and 1970 he won a silver medal in the event at the Conference Championship Meet. That sounds impressive! His best throw was 210-feet. Is that good? *Compared to whom?* In 1970 the winning throw at the Penn Relays was about 270-feet and the American record was 300-feet. Enough said! **Have you ever won a certificate, trophy, ribbon or medal for some outstanding performance? If so, how do you compare in what you do best with the best in the world?**

Accurate measurements require a standard. The yard is based on the distance between two



lines on a bronze bar made in 1845. The metric standard of mass is a one kilogram solid cylinder of platinum-iridium alloy maintained at constant temperature near Paris.

Jesus' words, actions, and attitudes are God's "good" standard. We have to stand back to back with Him and not fall short a fraction of a moral inch. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

The Good That Makes Our "Good" Look Bad



We desperately need to be *remade* by the God who became like us so we could become like Him. Jesus' goodness is to ours what the Pacific Ocean is to a puddle. Let's look at several passages that describe Jesus' moral perfection.

- So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:28-29).
- God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15).
- "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." (1 Peter 2:22).

On a scale of 0-100%, how would you grade Jesus' moral goodness? On the same scale, how would you grade your own?

We're Not *That* Good



Harold Weirich, a former biology professor at Millersville State College, explained to us students why we shouldn't use a pen to take his exam. "You're not *that* good." We made way too many mistakes. We were pencil and eraser people.

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In the moral realm we write with a pen. The ink represents our words, deeds, and attitudes. Whatever is written stays written. **When you consider the paper of your life thus far, do you need a small eraser, a large one, a 55-gallon drum of whiteout or a new paper altogether?**



Does a Rocket Powered by Human Goodness Get to Heaven?

George Barna's survey revealed that 83% of Americans believe that people are basically good. ² **Do you agree with them? Why? Do you believe you'll go to heaven when you die? On what basis should God admit you?**



We grossly *underestimate* God's "right-living" requirements and *overestimate* our goodness. God's moral standards are like a full-grown elephant's foot and our goodness like a baby's first socks. It's far from a perfect fit!

The Bible uses several different Hebrew words to describe how we fall short of God's moral standards.

The Boundary Bashers



One word for "sin" in the Bible means to cross over a boundary (Hosea 6:7). As children we often ignored the limits our parents set. Sometimes they knew. Sometimes they didn't.

When you were out of bounds as a child, what percentage of the time were you caught? When apprehended, what percentage of the time did you escape punishment?



We've all bashed God's wise and lovingly established boundaries. Heaven's "video cameras" record every trespass. Romans 2:16 tells us that one day God will judge the secrets of every person.

The Throne-Snatchers



A second word for sin in the Bible means "to break away from." We've denied God's right to rule over us and gone our own way (1 Timothy 1:9). We don't want anyone to tell us what to do. Not even God. **Do you agree? Why?**

The Love-Challenged



The most common word for sin in the Bible means "to miss the mark" (Romans 3:23). We've all repeatedly missed God's bull's-eye of perfect love for Him and our neighbor. Only Jesus didn't. We haven't *always* loved our neighbor as ourselves. According to Luke 10:30-37, our neighbor is anyone whom we have the capacity and opportunity to help.

Filthy What?



Jeremiah 17:9 describes the core of human personality as "deceitful above all things and beyond cure." Isaiah 64:6 compares our lifetime production of good deeds to filthy rags. Romans 3:10-23 teaches us that no one is righteous, not even one. No one voluntarily seeks God. No one.

Isn't it odd that 83% of Americans see the same heart these verses describe and call it *good*? Michael Green wrote, "The breakdown of marriage and family, the worldwide increase of torture and wanton killing, the mindless hedonism and greed, and the emptiness of belief and purpose that characterize so much of the Western world do little to support an optimistic view of human nature."³

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Why Did You Do That?

To see ourselves truly we must look at both our actions *and* motives. Often we do “good” things for bad reasons. Jesus’ good works were motivated by a desire to please and bring glory to His Heavenly Father. We want the glory for ourselves. We want others to know about the good that we’ve done. Romans 3:27 and Ephesians 2:9 both assure us that no one will have anything to boast about before God.

If Our Paper Isn’t Perfect, We Fail



Miss Messer taught English at Middletown Area High School. Her punctuation tests brought her students to their knees. When she detected a single mistake in a sentence, she marked the whole sentence wrong. None of her sentences were easy to punctuate! Hardly any of her students broke the 0 percent barrier.

Many think they’ll satisfy God if the paper of their life has more words spelled correctly than incorrectly. Not so! A holy, righteous God can’t tolerate even one undotted “i” or uncrossed “t.” Moral *perfection* is the standard. Only Jesus has it. According to James 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

It’s very sobering to know we don’t meet God’s right-living, right-talking, right-thinking, perfect paper requirement. What are we going to do?

Did Jesus Die for Nothing?



“Maybe if I try a little harder, I can do better,” we tell ourselves. Like a bee in a horizontal bottle with its base against the window, we fly, fly and fly some more toward the light, but never get anywhere. If we could get to heaven by our performance, why

did God at tremendous personal cost send his Son to earth to die on a cross? **Wouldn’t that mean Jesus suffered and died *for nothing*?** Explain.

An All-World-Substitute



Romans 6:23 tells us that sin’s penalty is death. That means spiritual separation from God. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were substitutes for the death of the sinner. Sheep, oxen, goats, and doves took his place. The animals had to be perfect, unblemished specimens. The one making a burnt offering placed his hand on the animal (Leviticus 1:4). That symbolized transferring his guilt. It also represented transferring the animal’s innocence to himself. As we through faith place our hand on Jesus, the Lamb of God, our sins are transferred to Him and His virtues to us. He died for the *ungodly* (Romans 5:6). Not for *perfect persons* but for messed up ones! We qualify! Jesus paid the penalty of *our* sin. He tasted death for every man (Hebrews 2:9). We must trust in the sufficiency of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. We must commit ourselves to Him. When we do, we get credit for Jesus’ perfect life and He takes the rap for our botched up one. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). The only goodness that can endure the light and fire of God’s judgment is received from Jesus by faith.

God’s No Fare Plan



Karen Clemente was in Port Authority Bus Terminal in Times Square waiting to take a bus to Hoboken, NJ. A scruffy looking man asked her for change for the bus. He couldn’t afford the fare. As she walked toward

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the open door of the bus, she couldn't decide whether to help him or not. Once inside, she found the \$1.25 she needed to pay the man's fare. The driver closed the door and began pulling out of the station. She told him, "Don't leave! Let that man in. I'll pay for him." ⁴ **How does what Karen did illustrate what Jesus did for all humanity?**

Notes

1. Kuntzman, Gersh. in *New York Post* printed in "Heroes for Today" in *Reader's Digest*. July, 1998. p. 85.
2. Barna, George. *What Americans Believe*. Regal. 1991. p. 89.
3. Green, Michael. *Evangelism Through the Local Church*. Oliver Nelson. 1992. p. 27.
4. Clemente, Karen. In "Brightside". Campus Crusade for Christ. November 1997.

Believing God Exists Isn't Enough

The Survey Says...

George Barna found that 74% of American adults strongly agree and 12% agree somewhat that "there is only one true God, who is holy and perfect, and who created the world and rules it today." ¹ **If that's so, why are the moral values of our society "circling the drain"?**

Living like a Believer

Jesus' half-brother James *connects* belief and behavior:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. ²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a

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person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (James 2:14-26).

Do you agree that if people don't *live* their "beliefs," they don't really believe them? Why?

Faith's Object



The Greek word for "believe" means "to persuade, give credit to, trust, or confide in." ² Belief is only as good as its object. We trust in things and people every day. Sometimes it's no big deal. If we trust a friend to repay a dollar he borrowed, his failure won't ruin us. Sometimes our life is at stake. Some who've trusted a barrel to protect them during a plunge over Niagara Falls have been disappointed to death! The author's mother trusted a doctor to operate on her in a competent fashion. He didn't. She died. **Name several ways you daily risk your life through your trust in someone or something.**

Action, Action, We Want Action



Believe is an *action* word. Robert Chesebrough believed in the healing properties of the Vaseline he invented. He burned, cut, and scratched himself repeatedly to demonstrate its healing properties. People could see the wounds now healed and scarred over and realize both the value of Vaseline and the depth of Robert's faith in it. ³ **What are some specific ways one can *demonstrate* trust in God?**

Faith Is a Leaning Word

"Believe" is a *relationship* word. Most people believe that God exists. Relatively few have a relationship with Him that affects the way they live. John Paton translated the New Testament into the language of the New Hebrides in the South Sea Islands. Their language didn't have a word for "believe" in the sense of trust. Finally he found a solution. Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailor that in order to be saved he had to believe in the Lord Jesus (Acts 16:31).

Paton's translation was, "Lean your whole weight upon the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved."⁴ **How does Paton help you understand what "believe" means?**

Faith Goes Beyond Agreement

Belief is more than agreeing that God exists. The demons believe that (James 2:19), but they'll be on the wrong side of the pearly gates. Belief is more than *agreeing* that the Bible is true, that Jesus is God's Son and that he died on the cross for the sins of the world.

Faith Changes Us

True belief includes trusting in and doing what God says. Such faith transforms our "ugly duckling" character into an increasingly beautiful "swan." Without it we can't possibly please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Faith's Focus



Good tennis players watch the ball. It moves, whereas the lines on the court don't. Wherever it goes— left or right, high or low— they watch it.

Amid the unpredictable, ever changing circumstances of life, Christians keep their eyes

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on Jesus. They don't rely on faith or their own goodness. They trust their eternal destiny to Jesus alone and His finished work on the cross. They depend upon His resources to meet everyday problems. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Circumstances change. He doesn't. Jesus' character and promises are the *objects* of the Christian's faith.

Faith is Personal

Belief is centered in a living person. Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today! In 2008 the American people didn't elect George Washington. They selected and put their faith in a living person—Barack Obama. Christians put their faith in Jesus. They know Him and He knows them (John 10:14). They listen to His voice (John 10:27). They share His peace (John 14:27), joy (John 15:11), resources (John 16:24), and mission (John 20:21). He's their Shepherd. He loves them (John 15:9) and gives His life for them (John 10:15).

Faith Includes a Response

Belief is a *personal response*. I can *accept* or *reject* Jesus and all He offers. Putting the choice off is rejection on the installment plan.

One Storm-Worthy Vessel



God's final judgment is a raging class five hurricane somewhere over the horizon. No radar can detect it. Jesus is the Captain of the only ship, the church, that will survive it. No one forces us to enter His vessel and join His crew. We can build our own boat and captain it ourselves. We can take our chances with some other boat. The choice is real. It's personal.

Don't imagine we're inside a safe ship with a decision to stay or leave. That is to misunderstand our plight. We're in a rocking rowboat. The question isn't *whether* the hurricane will hit— it's *when*. Rejecting Jesus' offer to take us aboard means we're still in the rowboat. Putting off the decision means the same. Our decision is the most important we'll ever make. It has eternal consequences. **What are some benefits and costs of boarding Captain Jesus' ship of the church?**



Faith Transforms Relationships

Christian belief brings one into a right relationship with God. Romans 8:16-17 describe that relationship: ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Faith transforms the believer's relationship with *others*. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. ¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:14-16).

A believer has a different relationship with *himself*. It's summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:17 as becoming a new creation. Believers have a *new* sense of freedom because their guilt is removed and sins forgiven. They have a *new* desire to please God and a *new* servant attitude toward others. They possess a *new* love for other followers of Christ. They discover a *new* power to say no to sin's temptations and a *new* joy and

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confidence. They find a *new* supply road opened up to God's storehouse through prayer.

Weak Faith in a Strong God Is Enough



In early April 1978, Jack Selcher drove 50 miles from Fargo, North Dakota, to Cormorant Lake, Minnesota, to go ice-fishing. At the lake he discovered that two feet of open water around the shoreline bordered the frozen expanse. He wasn't about to give up. Although his faith was shaking as much as his knees, he took a deep breath and jumped. He feared the milky white edge would break when he landed. Much to his relief, it didn't! When he drilled a hole, he discovered the ice was 37 inches thick. Although his faith was weak, the yard of frozen water wasn't.

God is like that ice. The one who believes takes a leap of faith and lands on the bedrock trustworthiness of God's character and promises. It's not how *much* faith we have, but whether we place it, be it small or great, in the One who is trustworthy.

Faith Is a Choice



Truly believing in Jesus includes our intellect, emotions, will, and body. Faith isn't contrary to the facts of history. We don't have to kiss our brain goodbye! The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is substantial. Yet faith is more than merely agreeing that Jesus is all He claimed. We can't depend on feelings to gauge our relationship with God. If we do, our spiritual lives will have more ups and downs than an elevator! Responding to God is a *choice*. It includes giving God our body (Romans 12:1). **Do you think you could trust someone with your body who sacrificed His body for you? Why?**

The Narrow Passageway to Life

Belief has content, but we need to go beyond just agreeing with the facts. The first four letters of the alphabet summarize the narrow way that leads to life.⁵

A represents *admit*. To begin a right relationship with God, we have to *admit* that we have a disease the Bible calls sin. The symptoms are denial of God's right to rule over us, rejection of his moral boundaries, and a right-living deficit. If this disease is ignored, the inevitable result is death (Romans 6:23). Note: Death in the Bible means separation. Here it's separation from God forever.

B stands for what we need to *believe*. Becoming a Christian requires knowing who Jesus is. He is God in the flesh who has come to our rescue. He is Lord. He became as fully human as we and died on the cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins (1 Peter 3:18). He is alive forever because of His resurrection. He asks for our loyalty. He offers to come live within us and use His resurrection power to set us free from the paralyzing grip of sin (John 8:36).

C is *Consider* the cost of following Jesus. Jesus said that the one who tries to save his life will lose it (Luke 9:24). The cost can be summed up by three questions: Will you let Christ clean up the wrong things in your life? Will you give Him the control center of your life? Will you publicly identify with Him and his church?

D stands for doing something. We need to receive the gift God offers—Jesus. In John 1:12 the word that means the same as “believe” is receive. If I extend a twenty-dollar bill toward you and ask whether you believe it's yours, the only way to demonstrate your belief is to take it. Remember



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that faith is active. Revelation 3:20 pictures Jesus knocking at the closed door of an individual's life. It's dark inside. The place stinks. The La-Z-Boy in the living room is the "king's chair." The house represents our life. Jesus offers to come in, turn on the light and clean up the mess. He wants the La-Z-Boy because He alone is qualified to run the new operation. He's cleaned and lighted hundreds of millions of other homes. Will you let Him do the same for you? Have you ever invited Jesus to come into your life and take control? If not, that brings us to "Life's Ultimate Question." **ARE YOU READY TO OPEN THE DOOR OF YOUR LIFE TO JESUS NOW?** One way to say yes is through the following prayer:

LORD JESUS, THANK YOU FOR DYING ON THE CROSS IN MY PLACE AND TAKING MY SIN, DEATH, AND JUDGMENT UPON YOURSELF. I OPEN THE DOOR OF MY LIFE TO YOU. I WANT YOU TO COME INTO MY LIFE AND TAKE CONTROL. TURN ON THE LIGHT AND CLEAN UP THE MESS. THANK YOU FOR FORGIVING MY SINS AND MAKING ME A CHILD OF GOD. I WANT TO BE LIKE YOU. AMEN.

If these words express what you really want, make them your own. Realize that you're talking to the living Lord Jesus. He knows your sincerity and will honor the invitation to come into your life.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus promises that if you open the door of your life to Him, He WILL come in. He keeps His promises. You can depend on it! Don't expect a wonderful feeling inside. God honors active belief. Don't depend on your feelings. In 1 John 5:11-12 God promises eternal life to all who have Jesus, the Son. If you have Jesus, you have eternal life. Take God's word for it!

Growing on from Here

Read the Bible daily. Begin with Matthew. Write briefly in a notebook what you've learned and will try to apply to your life (1 Peter 2:2).

Pray daily asking Jesus to control you and show you how to apply the Bible to your life to make you more like Him. Pray about all your concerns (Philippians 4:6-7).

Every Sunday attend worship (Hebrews 10:24-25; Luke 4:16). Join a discipleship group that will nurture your faith.

Share your time, talents, and treasures cheerfully. Jesus wants to serve others through you. Tell others how you received Him and the difference He has made in your life.

Yield moment by moment to the control of the Holy Spirit of Christ who lives in you.

Notes

1. Barna, George. What Americans Believe. Regal Books. 1991. p. 201.
2. Lockyer, Herbert. All the Doctrines of the Bible. Zondervan. 1964. p. 194.
3. Walker, Ralph, Concord, North Carolina. Leadership Magazine. Winter Quarter 1991, p. 49.
4. Tan, Paul Lee. Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations. Assurance Publishers. 1984. p. 185.
5. Green, Michael. Evangelism Through the Local Church. Oliver-Nelson Books. 1992. p. 277-282.

If you'd like to be in a small group that discusses this material or have any questions about it, call Pastor Jack at 717-564-6673.